Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference
Sponsored by The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin
Abdulaziz Alsaud Center for American Studies and
Research at the American University of Beirut

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Shifting Borders: America and the Middle East / North Africa
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"Egypt . . . isn’t that in Switzerland?”
American Cartoons and the Egyptian Revolution

Walid El Hamamsy
Cairo University

Introduction

The question quoted in the title of this paper is actually a firsthand reaction I once received from an American citizen during a visit to the U.S. Inasmuch as her question can be interpreted as a simple cultural faux pas, it has deeper ramifications in that it is symptomatic of the reluctance to approach cultural “otherness” and the contentment with border thinking that besets many Western cultures. In this paper, I examine two types of popular hemispheric American reaction to Egypt’s 2011 revolution (January 25–February 11): American cartoons produced by a variety of U.S. artists and the work of Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff. This comparison shows two undercurrents that I consider within a transnational context. I show how the former group’s cartoons do not exceed the boundaries of essentialist Orientalist cultural symbology, whereas Latuff’s work constitutes an example that bypasses the limitations of stereotypical representation. I also highlight the widespread circulation of Latuff’s work among Egyptians as proof of the success of such examples of South-South dialogue. Additionally, I analyze a number of factors that have led to the success of Latuff’s work, which helps underscore the consequences of Orientalist representations on cultural dialogue between the U.S. and the Arab world.

American Orientalism Post-Said

In a recent lecture given on Edward Said’s birthday, John Carlos Rowe built on Said’s notion of European Orientalism to develop his own view of American post-Said Orientalism. Showing how American Studies has paid relatively little attention to Arab and Islamic cultures until recently, Rowe proposes that the latter has been “feminized, marginalized, minoritized, and above
He traces the shift American Orientalism has undergone since Said toward what he terms “internalization” – a strategy by which the traditional “Orient” is “domesticated” and “displaced” within the U.S. context, directly serving U.S. imperial expansion. Creating “American Talibans” and “American Iranians” (Rowe’s examples focus on John Walker Lindh and Azar Nafisi), this new American Orientalism gains a fresh vantage point through which to create cultural narratives wherein the protagonists “are rendered ‘representative’ Americans, whereas the Middle Eastern actors are generally demonized as ‘enemy combatants’ or at best subaltern ‘mediators.’”

North/Central American Cartoons: Internalization or Exoticization

Though I agree with Rowe’s above analysis inasmuch as it applies to the examples he analyzes, in this paper I argue that his thesis of internalization does not fully apply to the Egyptian model as exemplified through representations of the revolution in many American cartoons. In the samples I tackle below, Egyptian culture is in fact far from internalized by American discourse. For even if they do not demonize, sexualize, and racialize this Egyptian “other,” such cartoons exoticize the Egyptian citizen for their American audiences, reducing representation of the former to a set of pyramids, sphinxes, mummies, and camels. And many of the Egyptians seen in these cartoons are visually and metaphorically projected onto such a distant historical plain that the pyramid-dwelling Egyptian represented therein would mean absolutely nothing to the modern iPad-carrying, Facebook-using, Twitter-hashtagging American citizen.

Consider, for instance, Clay Bennett’s cartoon, “Egypt,” showing an Egyptian man removing the top of the pyramid of autocracy (the three letters “AUT” of the word “AUTOCRACY”) with two pairs of men by his side waiting to replace it with one of two alternative tops: “THEOCRACY” or “DEMOCRACY” (represented by another two sets of three letters: “DEM” and “THE”). Although these terms have a serious and direct bearing on Egypt’s future, the cartoon is detached from the two alternatives, implying that it does not matter which one is chosen in the end: building pyramids is what Egyptians do best. And if Bennett’s pyramid stands for Egypt, Marshall Ramsey’s cartoon⁴ represents the despot, Mubarak, himself. Ramsey’s piece follows logically in the footsteps of the previous cartoon. For what space would the pyramid-dwelling Egyptians inhabit except the desert, exposed to sandstorms, the description he aptly chooses to caption his cartoon? Ultimately, however, it is Steve Breen’s “The Camel’s Nose” that exposes the ideology behind such cartoons. Not only is Egypt holistically lumped together as an Arabian Nights-inspired tent, but the tent itself is immersed in total darkness. The camel dubbed “democracy” – the only living creature in the cartoon – is shown nosing under the tent’s rim and seems to pose the question: Can a bunch of Bedouins lumped in a tent get beyond a “camel’s nose” of democracy within the bounds of their dark ignorance? The piece’s cultural biases (symbolically represented by the tent, camel, and darkness) are too obvious to warrant any elaboration.

Naturally, in such and similar cartoons, pharaonic symbols abound. Take, for example, Bill Day’s Mubarak-Sphinx⁵ crushing the fragile and almost invisible flower of democracy between his toes; Henry Payne’s use of the same Mubarak-Sphinx symbol⁶ answering the Sphinx’s riddle about what happens to dictators who rig elections; or Dana Summers’s black-suited Mubarak⁷ being carried, in a mummy posture, by protestors into the “Cairo Museum of Antiquities.” Summers’s cartoon is especially intriguing not only because no such institution exists – unless what is meant is “The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities,” – but also because of the visual symbolism of Mubarak’s black suit, white shirt, and red necktie, which together represent the colors of the Egyptian flag. The message is ambiguous: Is it Mubarak going to history’s museum, or Egypt itself, which is metonymically represented through its flag? The implicit answer seems to be, once again: Who cares? The mummy and museum are there!

In such cartoons, cultural distance is maintained. As a cartoonist, you are asked to produce a piece on Egypt and revolution, you toss in all the symbols you can imagine about Egypt and mix them with yet another symbol that connotes revolution. Presto, there you have it! But this formula ignores that there are real people behind the revolution and that the revolution itself is real. Take how social networking and internet sites – key factors in disseminating calls for protest and countering the brutality of the former regime – have been highlighted and analyzed by various researchers. Egypt’s “electronic revolution” is reduced to a set of signal-transmitting pyramids in Matt Davies’s “Talk Like an Egyptian.” Here, the internet becomes
a pyramid when it “travels” to Egypt, standing erect on Egyptian sand against a background of unidentifiable sand dunes. Alas, there are no people in this “antique land”! Or consider Chris Britt’s “Egypt’s Ancient Desire for Freedom,” in which the only people shown are pharaohs facing an overpowering and threatening Anubis-like Egypt. In this cartoon, the Twitter logo becomes yet another hieroglyph on another temple wall. Egyptian internet is thus “Pharaonicized.” The status of this image is especially problematic due to the placement of the pharaohs (demonstrator stand-ins), barred by lines from the Twitter logo above and another hieroglyph-like inscription, “Freedom,” below them. Can pharaohs tweet? Can they ever have access to freedom? The logical inconsistency of pharaohs using Twitter seems to imply an answer in the negative. More confounding is why demonstrators are shown confronting a repressive Egypt, when the demonstrators’ aim is precisely to liberate that Egypt – and themselves – from the tight grip of dictatorship. Representing Egypt as the evil enemy in this context seems to reveal much ignorance and lack of genuine interest in facts and realistic representation. Clearly, the focus is covering the revolution rather than the nature of the revolution.

Reception: The Ideological Context

Though one can go on analyzing an endless number of examples, what I would like to consider now is the reception of such cartoons by their subject matter and their audience. For far from aiming to incite hostility or hatred toward the revolution, such cartoons are mostly sympathetic to the protests and their instigators. Herein precisely lies their danger, for such cartoons end up distorting the Egyptian reality they seek to represent. And I, an Egyptian protestor and protest-supporting citizen, do not see myself in them. They do not, in fact, do anything but provide a touristic view of the revolution. In these cartoons, I remain under the other’s gaze, just as Rob Rogers’s tourists look at a Mubarak mummy through a magnifying glass in his cartoon, tellingly entitled “Ancient Egypt.” Except in these cartoons, it is the reader, not Mubarak, who is “mummified” and “stuck in the past” with these silly stereotypical images.

In so diluting and distancing the Egyptian reality, there is very little to which the average American, the cartoons’ presumed target audience, can relate. For this audience, the Egyptian revolution takes place within temples and museums. The latent pervasive ideology that is leaked through such popular representations has wider ramifications beyond the quotidiant. The most dangerous political consequence of this visual representation lies in absolving the American citizen, and by extension the Obama administration, of any moral responsibility toward the Egyptian revolution, be that in the form of support or pressure. It is a pharaoh’s business, a revolution in hieroglyphics. There is nothing for present-day Americans to meddle with in this ancient land’s revolution except voyeuristic observation.

Carlos Latuff: Bridging the Cultural Gap

Turning now to the other typology of popular representation of the revolution, I argue that Carlos Latuff’s work is diametrically opposed to the above samples, precisely bridging the cultural distance that such examples do not dare approach. Thus, while they remain distant, disengaged, and politically sterilized, Latuff’s work gets down and dirty; it is involved, representative, and realistic. But what are the features that characterize Latuff’s cartoons, and which have contributed to Egyptians’ immediate identification with them?

Cultural Specificity: From Pharaohs to Flesh and Blood

A key reason that Latuff’s cartoons have immediately resonated with Egyptians is that his work represents real Egyptians with real concerns. Any cursory look at his cartoons would show contemporary figures with whom Egyptians would instantaneously recognize and identify. For example, Khaled Said – a young Alexandrian tortured to death at the hands of police forces and one of the major reasons behind the protests of January 25 – is represented in one cartoon standing triumphant with a dangling, sweating, and dwarfed Mubarak between his fingers (Image 1). In another cartoon, Khaled Said is depicted wearing a t-shirt in the form of a map of Egypt representing all Egyptians, roaring at his compatriots to “wake up,” which deafens yet another identifiable figure, Habib El Adly, Minister of the Interior, at whose forces’ hands Khaled was beaten to death. Dina Abdel Rahman, a TV talk show host fired from Dream TV by the Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) for criticizing their actions, is shown in another cartoon being violently silenced by a member of SCAF (Image 2). Another
cartoon focuses on Hazem Abdel Azim, a Minister of Telecommunications with politically progressive views, who was excluded from cabinet in July before taking the oath upon alleged accusations spread by SCAF about his dealings with Israeli telecommunication companies; the cartoon shows a member of SCAF tripping him, using the suspicious and disrespected (in the eyes of many) tabloid *The Seventh Day* (اليوم السابع), deployed by SCAF to spread its allegations about him. The use of such culture-specific figures connotes Latuff’s understanding of the events, despite his physical distance from them. Unlike the earlier samples, the inclusion of such real figures within the cartoons signals a genuine engagement with key turning-points in the history of the revolution.

Even when drawing less immediately recognizable laypeople, Latuff’s work is marked by variety and reflects the diversity and reality of Egyptian citizens, thus enhancing viewers’ identification with his work. Take, for instance, the young male football player clad in the colors of the Egyptian flag with “January 25” transcribed on his uniform: he gives Mubarak a kick on the bottom, the latter shown as a ball thrown helplessly in mid-air (Image 3). Or consider the young veiled woman, dressed in almost identical colors, tweeting away with a threatening SCAF snake waiting behind her back (Image 4). The latter is a reference to accusations against activist Asmaa Mahfouz for inciting violence against SCAF through Twitter, yet the fact that her face is hardly visible in the cartoon highlights instead her status as an average young Egyptian woman and pays tribute to women’s general participation in the revolution. Though I focus on these two examples, it must be noted that Latuff’s cartoons tend to reflect real Egyptian society and values, portraying a variety of citizens, from male to female, veiled to non-veiled, young to old – as shown in his cartoon of three ghosts of martyrs of the revolution, who are dressed in the colors of the Egyptian flag and shout “democracy” at a tortured SCAF member running away from their screams. The image simultaneously acknowledges the diversity of the demonstrators as well as the reality of blood spilled and lives lost – a fact especially appreciated by Egyptian dissidents in light of SCAF’s shift in discourse and constant attempts to misrepresent martyrs and activists as *baltygia* (thugs) through its manipulation of state-owned media, which is seen by many as a propaganda machine for SCAF.

A Visual Archive

The significance of Latuff’s work lies both in its immediacy and its continuity. Put together, his cartoons visually constitute a chronological timeline of the Egyptian revolution. For example, in one cartoon (Image 5), Latuff explicitly condemns Vodafone for its January 28th blockade of internet services by the government. In another, referring to the February 11th Egyptian victory at Mubarak’s resignation, Latuff depicts young democracy taking Mubarak’s place. In other cartoons, Latuff depicts the July 8th demonstrations that called for the immediate prosecution of former officials, as well as the threats made by SCAF’s General Fangari to the same demonstrators; here, Fangari is depicted as a marionette with a hidden Mubarak as his actual puppeteer (Image 6). Additionally, Latuff deals with SCAF’s clamp-down
on demonstrators on August 1st, the first day of the Islamic month of Ramadan (showing a SCAF member ironically wishing the woman carrying a photograph of the martyr, Khaled Said, a happy Ramadan (رمضان كريم); in another cartoon, Latuff depicts Ahmed Harara, a doctor-activist who lost both his eyes in brutal confrontations with the police and Central Security Forces in January and November, respectively. 30 And in December 2011, Latuff dealt with retired General Kato’s hate-inciting statement that demonstrators deserve to be burned in Hitler’s ovens.31

Clearly, Latuff’s cartoons have kept abreast of political developments in Egypt on an almost daily basis. Moreover, the appeal of such cartoons is enhanced by their adoption of Egyptian-specific humor and inclusion of such cultural signifiers as have been mocked by Egyptians themselves – Fangari’s threatening “finger,” Kato’s “ovens,” or Mubarak’s nose-picking during the first hearing of his trials for killing protestors on August 3rd. Latuff’s cartoon exposes Mubarak as a performer with cameras on a set, his lawyer prompting him to act as victim with the words “الآن العب دور الضحية.. حسناً” (”Well . . . now play the victim!!”) coming out of a hand-held microphone.32

Arabic as a Medium of Communication

Finally, one of the most significant reasons why Latuff’s cartoons gained immediate resonance with Egyptians is their conscious inclusion of Arabic text. Many of the examples I have analyzed above incorporate Arabic words such as “شهد” (martyr), “ديموقراطية” (democracy), and even Dina Abdel Rahman’s name written in Arabic. But Arabic phrases and sometimes sentences can also feature more prominently in Latuff’s work as the only commentary in some of his images. Examples include a rendition in Arabic of a protestor reprimanding a soldier with his reproachful plea: “Egyptian soldier, do not attack your own people”15 (” يا عسكري يا مصري متهاجمش أهلك وناسك”), in which the protestor and soldier share exactly the same facial features to further exacerbate the paradox of the soldier’s offense (Image 7).34 Another cartoon uses the slogan adopted by many demonstrators: “No to Military Trials for Civilians” (”لا لمحاكمة المدنيين عسكرياً”). In another cartoon, Latuff articulates his own appeal to Egyptian citizens in Arabic as a result of collaboration with Egyptian graphic designer and photographer Mohammed Gaber (another sign of Latuff’s genuine interest in Egyptian culture, revolution, and artists): ”كن مع الثورة” (”Be with the revolution”).36 In this cartoon, the text is written in Arabic calligraphy in the colors of the Egyptian flag; the cartoon’s top right-hand corner shows a hand carrying the flag, and its bottom left-hand corner shows Mubarak trampled under a demonstrator’s shoe (Image 8). The text was at once adopted by many Egyptians as one of the insignia of the revolution, printed on t-shirts and worn in different contexts as a resistance symbol to the many SCAF-instigated attempts to bring down the revolution. To my mind, this cartoon is a key reason that Latuff has earned such favorable and appreciative appellations, many of which are now widely used among Egyptians on social networks, including: “فنان الثورة المصرية” (”The artist of the Egyptian Revolution”) and ”رسام ثورة 25 يناير” (”Cartoonist of the January 25 Revolution”).37

Conclusion

I have attempted to show two very different American models of cartoons depicting popular accounts of the Egyptian revolution. The samples I have showcased reflect two foci in presenting the same historical events,
highlighting the element of choice in the artists’ representation. Clearly, Latuff’s realistic depiction of the revolution, his direct engagement with its events, and his constant attempts to address a primarily Egyptian/Arab audience have no equivalent in the first model. The two models clearly illustrate a difference of allegiance. The first model reflects an outsider’s view of a culturally foreign, amusing, but unrealistic “other” to an audience who tend to gaze or stare but not touch, as if they were in a museum; the second opts for more engagement and is freed from border thinking, ending up as a form of activism from within. Latuff expresses this form of activism best in response to an interviewer’s question about his message to the Egyptian people: “I wish to tell Egyptians that my art is at their service, in order to promote their struggle and boost their morale. My art is their art.”

Inasmuch as the two models analyzed above say something about the (Egyptian) cultural “other” they depict, they say much more about America itself. And it is hard to think of them in separation from such notions of America as a non-monolithic, transnational community, a community “troubled . . . with a more contested actuality than is usually ascribed to it,” as Edward Said puts it. Commenting on this transnationalism, Rowe, in turn, proposes a more inclusive academic intervention when he writes:

In my view, it is our role as area studies researchers and cultural critics to follow precisely the path delineated by Rowe above, if cultural dialogue is to be attained and border thinking overcome. Amen!

Notes


4. Ibid., 8–14.


13. The cartoon’s title itself alludes intertextually to the controversial pop song released by the UK all-girl band, The Bangles, in 1986, which was unofficially banned in Egyptian media for what was seen by some as its insensitive lyrics and attitude to Egyptians. The Bangles, “Walk Like an Egyptian,” YouTube, uploaded 4 March 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FwF-AxG5DRk>.

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15. It is worth remarking that the majority of samples analyzed above were published on 1 February 2011, as the dates cited here will reveal. It is significant to note that though demonstrations started on January 25 and steadily intensified in response to the regime’s use of violence as of January 28, it was only on February 1 that American cartoonists started paying any noticeable attention to the political situation in Egypt. In my view, the significance of that date lies in the fact that it coincided with President Barack Obama’s speech on the “Egypt Crisis,” marked by a clear shift in American Administration’s discourse and allegiance toward the people rather than the regime in Egypt. To my mind, these cartoons came as a response to Obama’s speech with its focus on “peaceful transition,” which gave the cartoonists the green light to “cover” the Egyptian revolution rather than as a response to the political situation itself. The speech’s anti-Mubarak tone also explains the various representations of Mubarak as a despot walking toward his end. See Barack Obama, “President Obama Egypt Crisis (1 February 2011),” YouTube, 1 February 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-nnAmdgkRE>.

16. The extent of the spread of such Orientalist approaches to the Egyptian revolution can be gleaned from any quick online search related to cartoon representations of this historical event. For a reservoir of such faulty and culturally insensitive representations, the interested reader can see, for instance, “31 More Egypt Revolution Cartoons,” The Social Poets, 3 February 2011, <http://thesocialpoets.blogspot.com/2011/02/31-more-egypt-revolution-cartoons.html>.


21. I am grateful to Carlos Latuff for providing high-resolution versions of his cartoons and for his kind permission to reprint them in this paper. Carlos Latuff, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2011.


34. It must be noted here that, in addition to the use of Arabic as a means of addressing his audience, Latuff’s choice of vernacular Egyptian Arabic further highlights his allegiance to his Egyptian audience in particular and his choice to side with the revolutionists by “talking” their language, so to speak.


38. Latuff’s choice of Arabic as a medium of communication can be seen as a conscious decision when one puts it in its proper context: the artist’s linguistic and biographical background. Contrary to many people’s belief that Latuff’s interest in Egypt stems from his Arab origins—a belief instigated primarily by his Arab last name,—Latuff himself contradicts this fact, writing in an interview with Ahram Online: “My grandfather was Lebanese, but my interest in Middle East has nothing to do with that. I believe in solidarity with people, worldwide. Do not believe in everything you read on Wikipedia as my entry, for example, is always vandalized by Zionists.” He goes on to explain that his interest in Middle East politics started with a visit to Palestine (the West Bank) in 1999 and that he has in fact never visited Egypt, speaks no Arabic, and depends on friends and activists on Twitter for translation and information. That Latuff chooses to caption his cartoons in Arabic despite the linguistic barrier, his conscious efforts to keep au courant with events in Egypt and seek like-minded activists to help him do so, his adamant insistence on addressing an Egyptian/Arab audience even at the expense of estranging his most immediate and obvious Portuguese-speaking Brazilian audience, few of whom would readily understand Arabic, are all factors that highlight Latuff’s informed choice to support the Egyptian revolution and demonstrate his loyalty to its cause. For more on the artist’s background, see Ali Metwaly, “Carlos Latuff Gives a Voice to the Oppressed with His Art [Interview],” Ahram Online, 4 August 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/18092/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Carlos-Latuff-gives-a-voice-to-the-oppressed-with-.aspx>.


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