

Name of Student

Prof. Dr. Kornelia Freitag
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Term Paper

“Changed Their Country, and in Doing So Changed the World”:
‘Transnational Connectivities’ in Obama’s Speech on Mubarak’s Resignation

1. Introduction

On February 11, 2011, around 12 pm Eastern European Time, Hosni Mubarak resigned as President of Egypt. On the same day, at 3 pm Eastern Daylight Time, US President Barack Obama addressed his nation and the transnational arena on this event. Obama's speech was transmitted live via international news channels and online, and was followed by millions of viewers in the United States and globally. The fact that I learned of Mubarak's ouster through Obama's speech that I happened to watch live while traveling in Israel goes some way of showing the transnational dissemination of media connections, or ‘mediascapes’ – and gives an idea of how our transnational perception of events is medialized and channeled through the ‘ideoscapes’ of the US (or other world powers).¹ Although the critical term ‘transnationalism’ can be rightly challenged for not describing entirely new phenomena, one has to note “the term's hallmarks” of “intensity and simultaneity,” as Steve Vertovec puts it (448) when reflecting on the fact that the American President almost instantly addressed his nation

¹ The terms “mediascapes” and “ideoscapes” have been coined by Arjun Appadurai (35).

in a highly emotional speech concerning an event in a seemingly remote part of the globe, and the address is broadcasted worldwide.

The simultaneity with which such events are registered and responded to globally points to the existence of new forms of what Inderpal Grewal calls “transnational connectivities” (30). As American newspapers and television channels cover the protests in the Middle East, it becomes evident that, due to diverse economic, financial, and political links, there is something at stake for Western countries in the centers of unrest. This can be illustrated, for instance, by the curious link between the Egyptian unrest and the global stock markets: while US and international stocks declined in the days before Mubarak's resignation, his ouster “was met with a favorable reaction from Wall Street” (Halzack n.p.). It thus becomes evident that Obama's remarks on Egypt serve economic and political ends. The fact that the White House apparently feels the need to assess events in Egypt from an American perspective indicates an interest of the nation-state to position itself in relation to other nation states and to participate in and shape the national discourses of other states.

To analyze this speech according to concepts of transnationalism not only shows that the theory is adequate for describing ways in which states have become connected, but also that it is not just a theory for discussion in the ivory towers of academia. Instead, an understanding of its basic concepts can help to assess political and current affairs from a critically informed viewpoint. This paper mainly draws on Inderpal Grewal's analysis of what she terms in her book under the same title *Transnational America*. Her analysis of nationalist discourses and transnational responses to 9/11 provides a methodology that can effectively be used in an approach to Obama's speech. In the following analysis of the “transnational connectivities” in “Remarks by the President on Egypt,” I will use Grewal's approach in order to pinpoint step by step the ‘master terms’ of Western transnationalism. I will argue that in Obama's speech non-

Western nations are homogenized and stereotyped by means of discourses of risk and safety, universal history and rights, transnational solidarity and the global-local nexus. These discourses are utilized to reflect on the crisis in Egypt and its relation to the Western world.

2. 'Transnational Connectivities' in "Remarks by the President on Egypt"

2.1 'Master Terms': Freedom and Democracy

Obama's speech on Mubarak's resignation becomes an instance of transnational negotiation since it, beyond offering comment on the situation in Egypt, positions American values in relation to these events. In order to explain how this pertains to transnationalism, it might be helpful to first examine Inderpal Grewal's analysis in more detail. Grewal reads "what is called 'America' as a nationalist discourse that produced many kinds of agency and diverse subjects" (2). Instead of reiterating Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as 'imagined community,' Grewal goes one step further by proposing an understanding of America as a "nationalist discourse." This is essential for any analysis of how this discourse can shape and in turn be shaped by other nation-states. In terms of the discourse of America, Grewal states that "America was important to so many across the world because its power enabled the American nation-state to disseminate the promise of democratic citizenship" (ibid.).

Interestingly, Obama's speech subscribes to this idea of democracy as an inherently American ideal that is disseminated globally. The first three paragraphs of his speech, which seemingly focus on Egypt, emphasize the country's transition to democracy: "Egyptians have made it clear that nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the

day” (2).² The idea of “Egypt's transition,” first mentioned in the second paragraph, is taken up in the fourth paragraph, now in relation to the US: “The United States will continue to be a friend and partner to Egypt. We stand ready to provide whatever assistance is necessary – and asked for – to pursue a credible transition to democracy.” The repetition of “transition” in this context creates the impression that Egypt cannot implement change without assistance by the US. Democracy, it seems, is an American area of expertise; US assistance is therefore made to appear necessary. Egypt, as Obama visualizes it, appears as a kind of junior partner to the US that collaboratively spreads the value of democracy: “I know that a democratic Egypt can advance its role of responsible leadership not only in the region but around the world” (4).

Arjun Appadurai describes the ideologies and counter ideologies of states that are disseminated globally as “ideoscapes” (35). One could relate Obama's speech to the dissemination of the ideology of Western democracy. As Appadurai states, “[t]he term *democracy* has clearly become a master term [which] sits at the center of a variety of ideoscapes” (37, original emphasis). This master term figures strongly in Obama's speech, with references to “genuine democracy” (2), “real democracy” (7), and “a democratic Egypt” (4). The idea of democracy that is constructed by the speech is both specific and vague. It is specific in that “genuine” or “real” democracy is implicitly opposed to ‘false’ kinds of democracy. It is vague in that these ‘false’ forms are not referred to. This reflects that the speech's audience is primarily American. American subjects are supposed to associate the term “democracy” only with its “genuine” and “right” – or American, as the subtext suggests – forms. As “a democratic Egypt” (4) is subsumed under the master discourse of Western democracy, the speech ignores that “political narratives [...] require careful translation from context to context in their global movements” (Appadurai 36).

² All references to Obama's speech are made to paragraphs, not page numbers. For the text of the speech, see appendix.

“Freedom” is another such master term that is promoted in the speech. Significantly, the term “freedom” occurs for the first time in the short passages following the paragraph on US-Egyptian relations. After establishing America's readiness to assist Egyptian efforts to build democracy, Obama begins a number of short and highly stylized paragraphs with the anaphora “We saw”. The first of these anaphoric paragraphs runs: “[w]e saw mothers and fathers carrying their children on their shoulders to show them what true freedom might look like” (6). How the term “freedom” is structurally embedded is significant. Apart from appearing right after the US-Egypt paragraph, it seems that freedom only becomes visible and legible through American eyes. It is the American gaze, following events as represented by the media, that offers categories such as “freedom” to label the ideals Egyptians might strive for. One has to note, however, that Obama primarily addresses Americans; his need to adopt an American perspective therefore springs from the speech situation.

The fact that Americans are represented as 'seeing' the Egyptian longing for freedom is significant in a transnational context. Grewal explains how, in the aftermath of 9/11, “a national identity [was constructed] through discourses of political freedom and liberties” (204). Freedom not only came to represent one of the core values of the nationalist discourse shaped within America, it also became part of the discourse that was participated in globally. Although Obama's speech is, superficially viewed, about Egypt, it is evident that the dominant values it promotes, that is, democracy and freedom, are represented primarily in relation to the US. The reason why the events in Egypt are closely followed by Americans, as the speech holds, is that they “are moved by these scenes [...] because of who we are as a people” (16). The American people are homogenized and essentialized by the phrase, “who we are as a people.” Furthermore, freedom and democracy are essentialized as inherent to the American national identity.

It appears that Egypt's striving for these values appeals to Americans in that it is an emulation of their history and ideals.

2.2 Homogeneity and Deconstruction of Stereotypes

Just as the American people are essentialized, the speech represents Egyptians as a homogeneous group. There are numerous references to “the people of Egypt” (1, 2, 5, 16) and “their voices” (1, 3), while the only differentiation is made through a reference to “the young people of Egypt” (4), who are, however, equally homogenized. This representation forecloses the possibility that “Egypt's voices” (3) might not be homogeneous. Instead, a myth of “unity” (2) is constructed. Egyptians are represented as unified in their struggle against Mubarak and for democracy. This bears several implications with regard to transnationalism.

It is noteworthy that this positive depiction of the unified Egyptian people implicitly seeks to reverse dominant stereotypes of Muslims, especially male Middle Eastern Muslims, in the US. With regard to the creation of the figure of the terrorist after 9/11, Grewal explains how “Middle Eastern Muslim male [becomes] a new category of visibility” (209), which is primarily associated with “violence, fanaticism, and barbarism” (210). Obama's speech seeks to oppose each of these negative stereotypical characteristics with the construction of a positive one. Instead of violence, the “peaceful” (2) nature of the protest is emphasized. The association of Middle Eastern people with terrorism is even countered explicitly: “[I]t was the moral force of nonviolence – not terrorism, not mindless killing – but nonviolence [...] that bent the arc of history towards justice once more” (13). The insistence on the nonviolent nature of the protest, which is stressed through the repetition of ‘nonviolence,’ points towards the fact that Obama seeks to deconstruct dominant stereotypes in order to make his

illustration of a peaceful movement credible. The idea of Islamic fanaticism is countered with the image of “people of faith praying together and chanting – ‘Muslims, Christians, We are one’” (11). Finally, the stereotype of barbarism is opposed with a reference to Egypt's “pivotal role in human history for over 6,000 years” (5). The construction of positively connoted Egyptian subjects explains why strategies of homogenization are necessary in the speech. In order to successfully deconstruct stereotypical associations with terrorism and violence, the Egyptians have to be represented as unified in their peaceful struggle.

2.3 Discourses of Risk and Safety

The representation of Egyptians as a homogeneous group also needs to be seen against the background of the 'risk society'. Discourses of risk and safety increasingly circulated after 9/11 in the US. Safety came to be defined “as a condition of living” (Grewal 2003). It therefore makes sense that, beyond deconstructing stereotypes of the terrorist, Obama's speech deconstructs conceptions of risk in favor of safety. The second paragraph contains a hint that Egypt's process towards democracy might be problematic: “I'm sure there will be difficult days ahead, and many questions remain unanswered.” This concession is a mild understatement. It must have been evident to the U.S.-government that Egypt faced more than “difficult days” and “unanswered” questions after Mubarak's ouster. And yet, the concession is even mitigated by an avowal of optimism, as Obama represents himself as “confident that the people of Egypt can find the answers” (2). The potential for conflict is thus downplayed.

The repression of risk and conflict is further connected to an idealization of the Egyptian military: “[t]he military has served patriotically and responsibly as a caretaker to the state” (3). This representation is highly questionable, not least because it ignores

basic facts. Far from acting “patriotically and responsibly” throughout, the armed forces have had an ambiguous role. One has to concede that this may not have been entirely apparent at the time of Mubarak's resignation. However, recent reports reveal the military's continuation of repressive practices, which, according to an Egyptian activist, “opened a whole window into this awful world that no one knows about [...] and no one wants to talk about. Everyone was talking about the military as our saviours” (Fadel 4). Viewed against these insights, the representation of the army as 'caretaker to the state' appears naive. Clearly, Obama represents the military as a responsible force in the process towards democracy in order to assert safety. His need to take a stance in the Egyptian upheaval thus also stems from the necessity to appease worries that fragility and instability might result from it. Obama has to negate risk and conflict so that the construction of safety as a “condition of living” can be maintained.

2.4 ‘Universal’ History and ‘Universal Rights’

The strong emotional reaction implied in the speech illustrates transnational connectivities between Egypt and the US. Far from merely commenting on recent events, the speech encourages identification with the Egyptian people: “[t]oday belongs to the people of Egypt, and the American people are moved by these scenes in Cairo and Egypt because of who we are as a people” (16). What also emerges from this passage is that the events in Egypt are not only significant locally but also globally, and to the US in particular. Obama contends that the Egyptians “changed their country, and in doing so changed the world” (17). It is not self-evident in which ways the upheaval in Egypt “changed the world.” The fact that Obama holds this without explaining it, and even ends his speech with this statement, shows how transnational connectivities have

come to be taken for granted, so that the one accepts that changes in one part of the world at the same time mean change for the world at large.

This idea is reinforced by Obama's assessment of the events with regard to 'universal' history. He ranks the protests with "Germans tearing down a wall, Indonesian students taking to the streets, Gandhi leading his people down the path of justice" (14) and with "the birth of a new nation in Ghana" (15). This is connected to an essentialized notion of humankind, as he quotes from Martin Luther King: "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom" (ibid.). This essentialization of the longing for freedom, in connection with a representation of history as a universal struggle for freedom, democracy, and justice, further explains why Obama comments on Mubarak's resignation so swiftly and emotionally: the events can be aligned with the general "human" struggle for these values. By aligning the events in Egypt with this overall struggle, they are made to appear less specific, more universal. In addition, as it is the values of freedom and democracy that humankind is said to universally strive for, American values are implicitly reinforced. Notably, all of the 20th- and 21st-century events that Obama enumerates can be seen as the legacy of the "earliest", American, fight for independence and democracy.

Apart from subscribing to the narrative of a universal striving for freedom, the speech promotes the discourse of "universal rights" (5). The speech must be seen in relation to debates about the nature of citizenship:

One result of these debates was the claim not simply of rights from a nation-state but also of 'universal rights' regardless of national citizenship. This concept of rights as human rights articulated a subject that was both national and international, thus suggesting that the nation-state was powerful but also insufficient. (Grewal 11)

Obama's speech promotes the claim to "universal rights," which is the precise term that Obama uses in the fifth paragraph, while it also distances itself from this debate. On the one hand, the existence of universal rights is presupposed. Although the exact nature of

these rights is not spelled out, it appears that freedom and democracy are what Obama conceives of as universal rights.

On the other hand, Obama subscribes to the belief in universal rights with an entirely different conclusion. The idea of “rights as human rights,” as Grewal explains, includes the conception of a cosmopolitan subject, and thus suggests that “the nation-state [is] powerful but also insufficient” (ibid.). Obama's does not promote a cosmopolitan subjectivity and a transcendence of the nation-state. Rather, the speech stays within the firmly established categories of national identity, referring to Egyptian, American, German, Indonesian, and Ghanaian identities. The idea of a cosmopolitan subjectivity is, however, hinted at by his emphasis on “the common humanity that we share” (11). Obama acknowledges transnational connectivities as he states that the Egyptian events change the world at large. Still, it is from within the American viewpoint that change comes about, for “Egyptians have inspired us” (13). The borders of national identity are reinforced as Obama stresses the American gaze on Egypt in the anaphoric “We saw”-passages.

2.5 Transnational Solidarity

Thus, Obama's speech encourages “transnational solidarity” (Grewal 206) without destabilizing national boundaries. This can be also seen from his statement, “[t]oday belongs to the people of Egypt” (16), the one phrase of the speech that has undoubtedly attracted the most attention. Greg Sargent, in *The Washington Post Online*, instantly praised this line as “link[ing] the events in Egypt to American aspirations towards freedom and democracy [...] while affirming sole ownership of this moment to its author, the Egyptian people” (n.p.). The balance between transnational solidarity and Egypt's “sole ownership of this moment” becomes evident when seen in relation to 9/11.

Grewal recalls the headline from *Le Monde* in response to 9/11: “We are all Americans” (206). This transnational identification can be contrasted to Obama's insistence on Egypt's “ownership,” and by adhering to the boundaries of national identity.

2.6 The Global-Local Nexus

Finally, Obama's speech reverberates with the global-local nexus as described by, for instance, Ulf Hannerz. Resisting tendencies to emphasize the global and globalization, Hannerz argues for the “continued importance of the local” (27). Although Obama's speech can be seen as a product of globalization, with regard to the intensity and swiftness of his response and his emphasis on the implications for the world at large, it resists globalizing tendencies by stressing the local dimension of the events. There are two references to Tahrir Square (15, 17), which localize the events and thus frame them spatially. The events are put into a global context, however: “Those were the cries [for freedom] that came from Tahrir Square, and the entire world has taken note” (15). Tahrir Square as the local site of the protest is turned into a global signifier by Obama's translation: “The word Tahrir means liberation” (17). One person fittingly commented on the above mentioned online article by Sargent that the “most important/lasting effect from this speech [was to] cement [...] Tahrir Square as THE iconic symbol of the revolution” (n.p., original capitalization). Thus, while Obama emphasizes the locality of the events, he turns Tahrir Square into a global symbol of the struggle for freedom. This strategy enables Obama to draw attention to events remote from American reality, and to rank the events with the global struggle for freedom that he emphasizes.

3. Conclusion

On the whole, Obama's speech can be seen to carefully negotiate transnational connectivities and express transnational solidarity. The speech further negotiates the balance between the local and the global by both insisting on the local rootedness and significance of events in Tahrir Square and stressing the global impact of the changes in Egypt. As has been demonstrated, transnational connectivities require governments to position themselves in relation to significant events of other nation-states. The White House seized Mubarak's resignation as an opportunity to reinforce the American ideals of freedom and democracy and to emphasize how these ideals relate to the US. The speech further establishes the desirability of US assistance.

With regard to the ongoing upheavals in the Middle East, it would be interesting to pursue an analysis of American responses to and coverage of these events from a transnational perspective. It is probable that a full assessment of the transnational implications will only be possible in retrospect, when it will become clearer how American notions of Middle Eastern subjects might alter and how American participation in the formation of new national discourses in the Middle East might alter these. For instance, America's involvement in Libya might encourage an examination against the background of transnationalism. Although this analysis of Obama's speech thus only offers reflection on one minor aspect in this field, it has yet served to show that transnational connectivities are a decisive component in the constant (re)construction of national discourses and identities.

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Honesty Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that all passages and ideas that are not mine have been fully and properly acknowledged.

Bochum, 14 April 2011, Max Müller

Appendix: "Remarks by the President on Egypt"

The White House
Office of the Press Secretary
For Immediate Release
February 11, 2011

Remarks by the President on Egypt

Grand Foyer

3:06 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. There are very few moments in our lives where we have the privilege to witness history taking place. This is one of those moments. This is one of those times. The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same.

By stepping down, President Mubarak responded to the Egyptian people's hunger for change. But this is not the end of Egypt's transition. It's a beginning. I'm sure there will be difficult days ahead, and many questions remain unanswered. But I am confident that the people of Egypt can find the answers, and do so peacefully, constructively, and in the spirit of unity that has defined these last few weeks. For Egyptians have made it clear that nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the day.

The military has served patriotically and responsibly as a caretaker to the state, and will now have to ensure a transition that is credible in the eyes of the Egyptian people. That means protecting the rights of Egypt's citizens, lifting the emergency law, revising the constitution and other laws to make this change irreversible, and laying out a clear path to elections that are fair and free. Above all, this transition must bring all of Egypt's voices to the table. For the spirit of peaceful protest and perseverance that the Egyptian people have shown can serve as a powerful wind at the back of this change.

The United States will continue to be a friend and partner to Egypt. We stand ready to provide whatever assistance is necessary -- and asked for -- to pursue a credible transition to a democracy. I'm also confident that the same ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit that the young people of Egypt have shown in recent days can be harnessed to create new opportunity -- jobs and businesses that allow the extraordinary potential of this generation to take flight. And I know that a democratic Egypt can advance its role of responsible leadership not only in the region but around the world.

Egypt has played a pivotal role in human history for over 6,000 years. But over the last few weeks, the wheel of history turned at a blinding pace as the Egyptian people demanded their universal rights.

We saw mothers and fathers carrying their children on their shoulders to show them what true freedom might look like.

We saw a young Egyptian say, "For the first time in my life, I really count. My voice is heard. Even though I'm only one person, this is the way real democracy works."

We saw protesters chant "Selmiyya, selmiyya" -- "We are peaceful" -- again and again.

We saw a military that would not fire bullets at the people they were sworn to protect.

And we saw doctors and nurses rushing into the streets to care for those who were wounded, volunteers checking protesters to ensure that they were unarmed.

We saw people of faith praying together and chanting -- "Muslims, Christians, We are one." And though we know that the strains between faiths still divide too many in this world and no single event will close that chasm immediately, these scenes remind us that we need not be defined by our differences. We can be defined by the common humanity that we share.

And above all, we saw a new generation emerge -- a generation that uses their own creativity and talent and technology to call for a government that represented their hopes and not their fears; a government that is responsive to their boundless aspirations. One Egyptian put it simply: Most people have discovered in the last few days...that they are worth something, and this cannot be taken away from them anymore, ever.

This is the power of human dignity, and it can never be denied. Egyptians have inspired us, and they've done so by putting the lie to the idea that justice is best gained through violence. For in Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence -- not terrorism, not mindless killing -- but nonviolence, moral force that bent the arc of history toward justice once more.

And while the sights and sounds that we heard were entirely Egyptian, we can't help but hear the echoes of history -- echoes from Germans tearing down a wall, Indonesian students taking to the streets, Gandhi leading his people down the path of justice.

As Martin Luther King said in celebrating the birth of a new nation in Ghana while trying to perfect his own, "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom." Those were the cries that came from Tahrir Square, and the entire world has taken note.

Today belongs to the people of Egypt, and the American people are moved by these scenes in Cairo and across Egypt because of who we are as a people and the kind of world that we want our children to grow up in.

The word Tahrir means liberation. It is a word that speaks to that something in our souls that cries out for freedom. And forevermore it will remind us of the Egyptian people -- of what they did, of the things that they stood for, and how they changed their country, and in doing so changed the world.

Thank you.

END 3:13 P.M. EST