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**Asleep at the Press:
Thoreau, the Nuances of Democracy and Egyptian Revolt**

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In the summer and fall of 2013, various media outlets and experts debated whether the Morsi overthrow was a coup. The common presumption was that if it was, it was unjust. Al Jazeera prominently promoted just this conclusion, along with many in the Western media who derided the overthrow as a travesty of democracy since Mohamed Morsi had narrowly won the presidential election the summer before. However, without adjudicating whether or not the overthrow was anti-democratic, the reasoning undergirding the dominant opinion among media pundits that it was remains questionable.

To begin with, “democracy” etymologically means empowering people, not voting, and even voting can serve undemocratic purposes that disempower, as would be the case if 80% of Egyptians voted to enslave the minority Copts. Furthermore, tyrants have gained power through elections, as with Hitler in 1933; and violent overthrow has established governments that most recognize—even if naively—as democratic, as with the American Revolution and more recently Portugal in 1974. Morsi and his supporters had tyrannical qualities. He decreed absolute power on himself, earning the nickname, “The Pharaoh.” His government stifled free expression, as when charging the satirist Bassem Youssef for un-Islamic activities. It encouraged “days of rage,” including violent mobs outside the U.S. embassy when an anti-Islam video was made by an Egyptian expatriate in California.¹ Morsi supporters threatened the lives and properties of Christians if they partook in anti-government protests, and in the aftermath of the ousting vandalized and murdered en masse, and in one instance paraded nuns like prisoners of war while sexually

¹ The Brotherhood’s Arabic Twitter feed instructed: “Egyptians rise up to support Muhammad in front of the American Embassy. Sept. 11.” Morsi also remained silent about the violent protests for several days until receiving a “blunt” phone call from President Barack Obama. See David D. Kirkpatrick, Helene Cooper and Mark Lander, “Egypt, Hearing From Obama, Moves to Heal Rift From Protests,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2012; also see Ian Black, “Mohamed Morsi: A Spectacular Balancing Act,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2012; Robert Kagan, “The Proper U.S. Response to Cairo Embassy Attack,” *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2012.

assaulting employees of a just-torched Franciscan school.² Morsi appointed Adel el-Khayat Governor of Luxor: a founding member of Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, a group with links to terrorist attacks, including the 1997 Luxor Massacre in which police officers, a guide and nearly 60 tourists, one of them a child, were killed.³

So while voted in, the actions of Morsi and much of his base were undemocratic in that they supported an agenda that disempowered. Indeed, like other Egyptian governments before it, albeit more brazenly, the Brotherhood expressed its wish to keep over half the population disempowered when it publicly attacked a UN bill titled, “End Violence Against Women.” Among much else, it objected the bill would give “wives full rights to file legal complaints against husbands accusing them of rape”; it would further cancel “the need for a husband’s consent in matters like: travel, work, or use of contraception,” while granting equal distribution of property after divorce, “[e]qual inheritance (between men and women),” and “equal rights to homosexuals” and “illegitimate sons.”⁴ Add to all of this that top Muslim and Christian clerics such as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayyib and Pope Tawadros II backed the ousting, as did the ultraconservative Islamic Nour Party in the early stages. Polls also had a vast majority of Egyptians wanting a temporary military takeover, and the number of people protesting to oust Morsi was perhaps unprecedented in history, though both points remain controversial.

Against these arguments, however, some urged that Morsi had a mandate, and should have been permitted to complete his term, no matter how unpopular. This is to insist that Egypt should have followed the example of Western powers, perhaps neglecting the fact that some of these nations have legal means of ejecting out of control leaders, for example, impeachment. Moreover, some complained that anti-Morsi protests were themselves fuelled by Egyptian media with military support. It cannot be denied that the military made its intentions clear by issuing ultimatums, and by flying helicopters over anti-Morsi throngs, dropping Egyptian flags, simultaneously a symbol of revolt and authority since the January 25th Revolution. Critics also objected that the reported 20 to 30 million anti-Morsi protesters were grossly exaggerated. The mass killings of sometimes—but not always—violent Islamists in the aftermath of the ousting and the recommended death sentences for hundreds of Brotherhood members, however unlikely

² Associated Press, “Egypt: Islamists Hit Christian Churches,” CBS News, August 17, 2013. Accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/egypt-islamists-hit-christian-churches/>; Foreign Service, “Islamist Mob Parades Nuns in Cairo as Prisoners of War After Six Hours Looting Church School and Replacing Cross with Banner Resembling Al Qaeda Flag,” *Mail Online*, August 18, 2013. Accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2396764/Egypt-crisis-Islamist-mob-parades-nuns-Cairo-prisoners-war.html>.

³ See “Bloodbath at Luxor,” *The Economist* (1997): 345, 83; Ian Burrell, “Funeral Anguish for Luxor Massacre Family,” *The Independent*, November 27, 1997; Alastair Beach, “Luxor Protests Against Morsi’s New Governor for the City – Former Islamist Terror Leader Adel el-Khayat,” *The Independent*, June 18, 2013. Ben Hubbard and Mayy El Sheik, “New Governor Is a Shock to Some Inside Egypt,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2013. Patrick Kingsley, “Egypt’s Mohamed Morsi Appoints Hardline Islamist to Govern Luxor,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2013.

⁴ “Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles,” Ikhwanweb: The Muslim Brotherhood’s Official English web site [*sic.*], March 14, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30731>.

to be carried out, are additional concerns. Also worrying are the jailed Al Jazeera reporters and the 12 year sentence—later reversed—imposed on young women peacefully demonstrating, not to mention a private broadcaster's decision to cancel Bassem Youssef's show because it gently poked fun at Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who oversaw the ousting of Morsi and was later elected President.

So was the initial overthrow of Morsi democratic or undemocratic? A definitive answer to this question is likely impossible, which raises questions about what led to the alignment of respected news outlets such as *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Toronto Star*, along with Al Jazeera and CNN. Frequently the alignment was subtle. For instance, reporters lamented the end of Egypt's first "democratically elected" ruler rather than just calling Morsi "popularly elected."⁵ Al Jazeera insistently characterized the protests as "pro-" or "anti-military" instead of "pro-" or "anti-Morsi," who was after all the central figure in the upheaval.⁶ Often approaches were more forceful, however. Al Jazeera was repeatedly faulted for biased coverage towards Morsi and his supporters⁷ in what *The Economist* described as its "breathless boosting of ... [the] Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt."⁸ Ranking newspapers published editorials titled "Egypt's Military Coup Casts Shadow over Democratic Revolution";⁹ or "Egypt Coup: The Military Has not just Ousted Morsi. It Has Ousted Democracy";¹⁰ or again *The New York Times* editorial that read:

Despite his failings, and there were plenty, President Mohamed Morsi was Egypt's first democratically elected leader, and his overthrow by the military on Wednesday was unquestionably a coup. It would be tragic if

⁵ For instance, see Richard Engel, Charlene Gubash and Erin Mcclam, "Morsi Ousted, Under House arrest, as Crowds Celebrate in Cairo," NBC News, July 3, 2013. Accessed January 19, 2015,

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/morsi-ousted-under-house-arrest-crowds-celebrate-cairo-v19261466>; Ben Wedeman, Reza Sayah and Matt Smith, "Coups Topple Egypt's Morsi," CNN, July 4, 2013. Accessed January 19, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/03/world/meast/egypt-protests/>. Other examples abound.

⁶ For example, "Al Jazeera Clarifies Video Error," Al Jazeera, July 27, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/201372719031775618.html>; "Anti-Military Protests Continue in Egypt," Al Jazeera, September 13, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/09/2013913152356681745.html>; Dahlia Kholaf, "Egypt Army Crackdown Splits Morsi Opponents," Al Jazeera, August 19, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/08/201381965050587310.html>.

⁷ See Cheryl K. Chumley "Al-Jazeera is Accused of Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Broadcast of Fake Street Death," *Washington Times*, August 21, 2013; Paul Farhi, "Mideast Journalists Allege bias in al-Jazeera's Reports on Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2013; Kelly McEvers, "Al-Jazeera Under Fire For Its Coverage Of Egypt," *National Public Radio*, July 18, 2013. Accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/07/18/202970802/Al-Jazeera-Under-Fire-For-Its-Egypt-Coverage>; see especially Sultan Al Qassemi, "Morsi's Win Is Al Jazeera's Loss," *Al Monitor*, July 1, 2012. Accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/morsys-win-is-al-jazeeras-loss.html>; Sultan Al Qassemi, "Al Jazeera's Awful Week," *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2013. Accessed February 2, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/12/al-jazeeras-awful-week/>.

⁸ "Must Do Better," *The Economist*, 406 (2013): 43.

⁹ "Egypt's Military Coup Casts Shadow over Democratic Revolution: Editorial," *The Toronto Star*, July 4, 2013.

¹⁰ "Egypt Coup: The Military Has not just Ousted Morsi. It Has Ousted Democracy," *The Guardian*, July 4, 2013.

Egyptians allowed the 2011 revolution that overthrew the dictator Hosni Mubarak to end with this rejection of democracy.¹¹

The alignment of the media is both noteworthy and troubling because all the media outlets in question are purportedly free; a free media is meant to be a backbone of democracy; and if free, one would expect a variety of conclusions on a matter as muddled as the Morsi overthrow. At the very least, one would have expected more to explore the possibility that the ousted government was not democratic in the first place.

With help from that great philosopher of revolt and occasional critic of the popular press, Henry David Thoreau, I consider events leading up to and following the July 3rd ousting and the media's handling of affairs. My aim is not so much to determine whether events were democratic—and certainly most can agree the government Egypt is currently left with is less than so—but to show that there were no clear answers to the question at the time of the overthrow, and to speculate on how the media nonetheless became so aligned in its interpretation and ponder the consequences of this.

Mubarak's Fall, Morsi's Rise: Recent Egyptian Revolt

The only Egypt I have ever known is one in political turmoil. I arrived in the first days of what was branded the January 25th Revolution and visited Tahrir. Optimism and a sense of community characterized those early days. So when the police abandoned their posts in late January of 2011, locals patrolled with makeshift weapons, tying plastic bags around their arms in place of uniforms. But unlike Philip Zimbardo's infamous Stanford Prison Experiment in which uniforms, sunglasses, batons and a position of authority converted otherwise well adjusted students into thugs,¹² I witnessed no intimidation. I was offered rides home from grocery stores when crowds engaged in panic buying, and guided home when lost after curfew. When Hosni Mubarak finally resigned, Egyptians, the world and its media outlets united in celebrating the triumph of democracy.

Those early days were inspiring. Yet optimism dwindled as life in Egypt improved little. Moreover, the military, which was lauded as “the people's army” and “for the revolution,” and which had in fact done much to keep the peace and prevent a bloodbath by placing itself between pro- and anti-Mubarak factions, faced a problem: By virtue of being a military organization, it is not equipped to rule civil society, and it overstepped bounds, though far less than many would have predicted. Some—albeit perhaps a minority—questioned what had been won. After all, the military remained in control as it had been since the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser. By the final runoff vote in the presidential elections of the summer of 2012, Egyptians were left with two unpalatable choices. One was Ahmed Shafik, a retired air marshal and last Prime Minister under Mubarak and therefore a representative of the old guard. The other was Morsi.

¹¹ “Crisis in Egypt,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2013.

¹² See Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007).

Morsi was a second-choice substitute for Khairat el-Shater, who was disqualified because of past convictions—possibly politically motivated—for terrorism and money laundering. Morsi ran for a party nominally independent of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was, in a kind of Orwellian Newspeak, branded “The Freedom and Justice Party.” Morsi went on to win by a narrow margin. Yet before the results were made official, his supporters made it clear that they would deem anything other than victory fraud and take to the streets.¹³ They accordingly began their short time in office with a threat: Give us power or pay. Like so many other governments that call themselves democratic, they also began with their own act of quasi-fraud, for a few days before being sworn into office, Morsi officially severed ties with the Brotherhood and The Freedom and Justice Party in order to uphold the Brotherhood’s promise not to run a presidential candidate. Following his resignation Al Jazeera’s Arabic’s bureau chief Abdul Fattah Fayed disingenuously proclaimed, “Morsi is no longer obliged to the Muslim Brotherhood,” in spite of the organization having just financed his campaign.¹⁴

Having said all this, I don’t want to suggest the Brotherhood had done nothing laudable. They had renounced their terroristic past, which involved alleged but still debated links to political assassinations, including an unsuccessful attempt on Nasser; and whereas liberals had long complained about conditions without offering solutions, the Brotherhood had established medical clinics and supplied food to the poor and done so years before its members had realistic hopes of gaining power in Egypt. Combined with their formidable organization and financial backing, the religious outlook of the masses, and the lack of unity among liberals and their disconnect with common Egyptians, the Brotherhood’s rise to power, if not assured, was not unexpected.

Morsi’s Slide

As with the January 25th Revolution, Egyptians initially rode the Brotherhood wave, albeit with less unanimity. Some businesses suddenly greeted people on hold with Islamic music. Self-appointed “religious police” berated women in salons, only to be chased out by the same patrons. Even so, many remained cautiously hopeful. However, Morsi and the Brotherhood played the same game many governments play: They sought to entrench their power and ideology first, worrying about the welfare of people second and primarily to the extent power is harder to establish if populations are entirely alienated. Of course, governments need not help people, but merely convince them that they are doing so—something experienced politicians, including those in the West, have long understood. From the standpoint of maintaining power, however, Morsi and the Brotherhood were at a disadvantage in that they were, as compared to their more seasoned counterparts elsewhere, unpracticed in the art of pretending to be democratic. Thus they constantly blundered. Again, Morsi took the politically ludicrous step of declaring himself above the law and granting himself total power; he gave a political

¹³ Dina Khayat, “Egypt’s Brilliant, Manipulative Muslim Brotherhood,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2012; Jack Shenker and Abdel-Rahman Hussein “Muslim Brotherhood Warns Egypt’s Generals,” *The Guardian*, June 18, 2012.

¹⁴ Al Qassemi, “Morsi’s Win Is Al Jazeera’s Loss.”

appointment to the man associated with the brutal massacre in Luxor and stumbled in numerous other ways.

By the late fall of 2012, protests were mounting against the Brotherhood. The standard response was that any who opposed the party must be pro-Mubarak remnants, even though most of the protesters, having liberal leanings, were anything but. Atheists were another scapegoat. Brotherhood officials also waxed interminably about the need to protect what the martyrs of the January Revolution had died to achieve. This was disingenuous given that the Brotherhood had officially refrained from participating. Furthermore, the Brotherhood was behaving in authoritarian ways that had provoked the rallies and sit-ins of the January Revolution. It was precisely this that demonstrators were protesting in the fall of 2012 when they took to the streets against the Morsi administration. Investigating Bassem Youssef, the exceptionally popular “Jon Stewart of the Middle East” who also worked as a cardiac surgeon, for maligning Morsi and later charging him for insulting the President and Islam were other blunders. Raising still more concerns about freedom of expression, Ahmed Fahmy, a leading Brotherhood member, made a public stink about a classic Egyptian film—barely more racy than *I love Lucy*—played on an Egypt Air flight, leading the airline to review its movies. More seriously, Brotherhood gangs attacked non-violent protesters; laws were created that allowed detention without judicial review for 30 days; and there was a generally permissive attitude to Islamist abuses of Christians.

Late in 2012, Morsi and his supporters, perhaps sensing their waning power, ramrodded a constitution through and put it to a popular vote with only a few weeks notice, and with a number of cabinet ministers and a presidential advisor resigning in protest. It achieved 64% approval, but with only about 33% of the public voting. Critics objected that it failed to protect minority groups and women and that little time had been left for debate and hence informed consent. As with most media pundits and indeed most people, supporters ignored the problem of the tyranny of the majority—and in this case, a largely ill-informed one. This was just a more specific repetition of the error made by those claiming the Morsi government was democratic merely by virtue of having been elected.

Thoreau on Democracy and Tyranny

Over a century-and-a-half ago, Thoreau penned a piece—*Resistance to Civil Government*, also known as *Civil Disobedience*—highlighting how a majority can tyrannize. He observed that “the practical reason why ... a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest.”¹⁵ Without suggesting that a majority is never correct, he concluded that “a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice,”¹⁶ thus pointing out that popular consent does not equal truth or moral rightness. For example, if a majority of people in a country believe women are inferior and that they should be precluded from certain jobs, positions of leadership and so forth, this does not make the belief true.

¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” [1849], in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 204.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

This is a hard sell in times when most equate democracy to voting. It is not uncommon to hear people say that something is “democratic” because the majority supports it, and “undemocratic” otherwise. Thoreau, who never voted, saw democracy in a different light. Speaking of issues that plagued his own time, he bitingly remarked:

There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade, and quietly read the prices-current[...], after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them... What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give only a cheap vote...¹⁷

On Thoreau’s account, therefore, filling out a ballot is not the primary means by which one exercises democratic power. “Cast your whole vote,” he urged, “not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority.”¹⁸ Thus if you think slavery or a given war is wrong, it is hypocritical and self-defeating to vote against it, only to follow the lead of a majority who has agreed to pay taxes that will support slavery and the war. The same can be said of authoritarian governments. One base requirement of genuine democracy in Thoreau’s scheme accordingly is that we refrain from actions that contribute to injustice. For Thoreau, this means allowing people to act freely so long as they are not interfering with others. To cooperate with economies and governments that commit injustices is to be guilty, and this is why Thoreau’s thought has been a call to the civil disobedience campaigns carried out by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and why it could also be seen as justification for much of what occurred in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

Though these are basic libertarian precepts, it is difficult to classify Thoreau as a libertarian. It is so because he cared little for private property. He also emphasized the interconnectedness of the world and therefore the extent to which we are guilty by virtue of interfering with other people’s lives rather than using the outlook to emphasize how little we are obligated to do, as most libertarians do. Yet Thoreau allowed with libertarians that it is not a duty to actively fight evils if an individual is not causing them directly or indirectly, though he would have applauded those who did. He added, however, that “it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of [an evil], and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.”¹⁹ In his day, this might have meant refusing to pay taxes to a government that supports the institution of slavery or not buying shirts made from cotton picked by slaves. So while Thoreau’s position does not

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

force us to act against every injustice, it still places enormous responsibility on each of us. Speaking of his contemporaries, Thoreau observed that:

[P]ractically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may*. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless.²⁰

So similarly everywhere: The opponents to justice are all those who contribute to injustice, which sadly means most of us by virtue of the economies and governments in which we participate.

On the grounds that a conscience is a defining feature of human nature, Thoreau argued that the suppression of conscience amounts to suppression of our humanity, which also happens to mean a suppression of individuality. Thoreau suggested that those who surrender their conscience to the state, act “not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies” Most of the time, “there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well.”²¹ They are so reduced because in sacrificing the capacity to rationally adjudicate to the state, religious authorities and the like, they lose a feature that differentiates them from inanimate objects. Consequently they “command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. ... Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.”²²

The Morsi government—with countless others—wanted and expected people to behave as “good citizens” in just this way. The cry that non-supporters were violating the principals of the Revolution and being un-Islamic, aside from neglecting that not all Egyptians are Muslims, was precisely a call for the kind of surrender that Thoreau abhorred. It was a call for unthinking cooperation, much like the insinuation that the government and constitution were democratic by virtue of once having had popular support.

Alignment in the Media

The overwhelming opinion of the Western media and Al Jazeera was that the ousting was a coup and therefore unjust. A number of highly regarded professors of ethics and politics from institutions such as NYU to whom I spoke advanced comparable views, one even justifying the mass killings of Egyptian police officers on the grounds that the oppressed Islamists had no other choice. There were a few dissenting voices in the popular press such as Rick Salutin who wrote:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

²² *Ibid.*

So I disagree with gloomy assessments of this week's turn of events in Egypt. Like a Guardian editorial saying Egypt "has returned to where it was two years ago." Or the Star: "It subverts the Arab Spring's most important gain: rule by the people." At the least the jury is out on that. Democracy isn't a classic script that actors must memorize and never deviate from. It's more like improv, shifting and reconstituting.²³

However, dissenting voices were unusual, and in light of facts about the Morsi regime, the just given theoretical understanding of democracy and tyranny and the fact that the Western media and Al Jazeera purport to be free, the alignment is puzzling.

One possible explanation is that the media is not that free. Some point out that Al Jazeera, while a private company, would not survive without funding from the Qatari government. However, the implications of this are far from definitive since news agencies such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation are publically funded, yet reasonably independent and often fiercer than average critics of their respective governments. At the same time, Al Jazeera's current chairman is a member of the Qatari ruling family, and the network does have a history of advancing the political agenda of Qatar. Before the fall of Mubarak, Al Jazeera—like the Qatari government—was highly critical of Egypt for its policy on Gaza. Qatar developed a much more favorable relationship with the Morsi government, perhaps in part because of its more cordial relationship with Hamas and other Palestinian organizations, and Al Jazeera coverage was skewed towards the Brotherhood. Indeed, reports from NPR among others indicated that Al Jazeera selectively filmed and showed the typically packed anti-Morsi protests on rare occasions when people were sparse; that it exaggerated the death toll of Brotherhood members and did so without sources; and that as many as 22 reporters quit Al Jazeera Egypt in objection to orders to present the Brotherhood in a favorable light.²⁴ Even Al Jazeera admitted to mislabeling very crowded anti-Morsi protests as "anti-military," which is to say, pro-Morsi, albeit accidentally according to the network.²⁵

Another piece published in *Al Monitor* at the beginning of Morsi's term details how Al Jazeera systematically favored the Brotherhood, gave voice to its supporters, while cutting off criticism during interviews.²⁶ Sultan Al Qassemi, the author, added:

This relationship [was] mutually beneficial, of course. Due to its blatant bias toward the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Jazeera [got] to host some of the most influential political actors in Egypt, such as Khairat El Shater, the deputy supreme guide of the group on multiple occasions. Ahmed Mansour, Al Jazeera Arabic's star anchor and Muslim Brotherhood member was rewarded with several interviews with not only Khairat El

²³ Rick Salutin, "If Egypt had a coup, is that bad?" *The Toronto Star*, July 5, 2013.

²⁴ McEvers, "Al-Jazeera Under Fire."

²⁵ "Al Jazeera Clarifies Video Error," Al Jazeera, Accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/201372719031775618.html>.

²⁶ Al Qassemi, "Morsi's Win Is Al Jazeera's Loss."

Shater, but also General Guide Mohammed Badie and Mohammed Morsi. The Brotherhood also appreciates this relationship and even bizarrely extends official congratulations and “support” to Al Jazeera on significant occasions.²⁷

More seriously, a *Washington Times* article reported Al Jazeera showing a faked death.²⁸ The agency consistently presented Brotherhood protesters as peaceful when eyewitnesses, including myself, observed truckloads of men armed with machetes and other weapons on their way to protests, even before the military crackdown. Moreover, some Islamists—not necessarily Brotherhood members but often supporters—massacred police in coordinated attacks, murdered high-ranking military officials and set off bombs in the aftermath of the ousting. Then there were the mass killings of Christians and destruction of their property. There was the bilingual doublespeak from the Brotherhood, preaching peace and democracy in English releases, while calling for “a million martyrs” in Arabic. There was also footage of protesters opening fire on soldiers, though it is hard to gauge reliability given it was supplied either by the military or media outlets explicitly supporting them. In any case, the Al Jazeera narrative reinforced by much of the Western media, that pro-Morsi protesters were marching bravely and non-violently into machinegun fire like the followers of Gandhi, had no credibility yet was consistently circulated. Al Jazeera displayed further sympathy by paying for hotel suites for Brotherhood members in Doha.²⁹

Assuming Al Jazeera was aligned with the Qatari government, then what did the government have to gain by supporting the Brotherhood? It is a puzzling point since the Brotherhood and the Arab Spring that swept it to power represented forces of instability objectionable to the largely authoritarian governments of Gulf states, which did not fall; and, moreover, because the Brotherhood, while once supported by Saudi Arabia, has been viewed as a threat by the same government in recent times, along with other Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Frank Bartscheck, in his excellent paper, “GCC Rivalry in Space: A Satellite Race to Influence the Arab Narrative,” suggests one line of explanation.³⁰ Drawing on Salah Eddin Elzein’s analysis,³¹ he speculates that Qatari and Al Jazeera officials were taking a gamble and allying with political forces that they predicted would become dominant in the region in the future. Whatever the reasons, however, it is clear that Qatar supported the Brotherhood, as evidenced by increased financial aid during their time in power. It is equally clear that other Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia opposed it, as indicated by its official congratulations and increased financial aid immediately after the Morsi overthrow; and

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Chumley “Al-Jazeera is Accused.”

²⁹ Abigail Hauslohner, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Finds Haven Abroad,” *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2013.

³⁰ Frank Bartscheck, “GCC Rivalry in Space: A Satellite Race to Influence the Arab Narrative” (paper presented at AUSACE Conference, Yarmouk University, Kingdom of Jordan, October 26-28, 2014).

³¹ Discussed in Elizabeth Dickenson, “The Case Against Qatar,” *Foreign Policy Online*. September 30, 2014. Accessed January 10, 2015, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/30/the_case_against_qatar_funding_extremists_salafi_syria_uae_jihad_muslim_brotherhood_taliban.

clear, moreover, that Al Jazeera was biased towards the Brotherhood, albeit perhaps not on the massive conspiratorial levels commonly alleged in Egypt.

Western outlets mirrored Al Jazeera's portrayal of the Brotherhood. One editorial from Canada's most esteemed newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, was titled "The Military's Massacre of Peaceful Protesters Has taken Egypt to the Brink," only the first lines were amended to read "mostly unarmed protesters."³² It failed to emphasize that regardless of country, armed protesters confronting military forces almost invariably leads to bad outcomes, however unjust. More problematically, the same editorial spoke of "retaliatory" attacks against Christians, as if to justify rather than reject them as senseless since Christians were not responsible for the killings of pro-Morsi protesters. The alignment of the Western media and the fact that the Brotherhood only began receiving modest negative press after the overthrow when its supporters began murdering Christians in large numbers and burning their homes and churches, combined with anecdotal but zealous sympathy I have observed from left-wing educated elite in the West, is surprising. It is so because Western media, while nurturing multiculturalism and therewith a rainbow of religious outlooks and hence Islam, is not favorable to Islamists, especially with the specter of Islamic terrorism and multiple wars fought in Muslim countries. So similarly with left-wing intellectuals: They advocate religious freedom, but typically not religious governments; and while promoting the principles of democracy, the Morsi government was emphatically anti-democratic. This indeed was one major fact that the Western media and left-wing intellectuals—among whom I count myself—consistently refused to accept, steadfastly making the mistake of equating democracy to voting.

The situation in the Western media further paralleled that of Qatar and Al Jazeera in that it reflected views of Western governments—or at least the official ones circulated—which were largely critical of the overthrow on grounds that it was anti-democratic. This sanctioned view was somewhat perplexing in that one suspects the West was uncomfortable with an Islamic government, but also because Western powers, while officially advocating democracy, have not shied away from publicly supporting tyrannical governments when it suits perceived interests. This occurred when America backed the criminally buttressed Batista administration in Cuba, the extremely brutal Pinochet regime in Chile and its overthrow of a popularly elected government, and Saddam Hussein before the invasion of Kuwait, not to mention the American armament of what ultimately became the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Were U.S. officials trying to avoid the sort of embarrassment that resulted from their initial silence about the short-lived Hugo Chavez overthrow—a silence broken only when reminded that he was the popularly elected President of Venezuela, however much hated by American authorities? At the time of the Morsi ousting, one suspected that criticisms from Western governments were not especially sincere, and since then it has become evident that they were not. Billions in military support continues to flow from America to Egypt, and the policy on Gaza advanced by the Sisi administration, as compared to that of Morsi, is more in line with that of the United States.

³² "The Military's Massacre of Peaceful Protesters has taken Egypt to the Brink," *Globe and Mail*, August 15, 2013.

Questions, however, remain about why the Western media followed official government rhetoric. One possibility is that they, like Al Jazeera, are not especially free. This is not to suggest that governments have direct control, but that the media is predominately regulated by the same vested interests that Western governments represent. In the case of Canadian media, for instance, there is evidence of unsavory influence, as when the Thompson family and owners of *The Globe and Mail* pressured the editorial board to support the extremely right-wing party of Tim Hudak in Ontario's provincial elections of 2014.³³ While most governments and the legal structures they enforce disproportionately favor the wealthy to the extent that they protect those with something to lose, as Adam Smith of all people pointed out,³⁴ Hudak would have carried this to new extremes in the Canadian context with tax cuts securing even more money to the wealthy. This suggests a possibility as to why the affluent West, along with its media, was uncomfortable with the Morsi overthrow. A purportedly democratic system resembling that of Western powers had been put in place, and once in place, there was a sense that its rules must be followed in order to remain democratic; the thought that the allegedly democratic government of Egypt could be overthrown might have been seen as a threat to ideology protecting the affluence of Westerners.

The bias towards the Morsi administration, especially among left-leaning media pundits and university professors I spoke to, may simultaneously have arisen out of collective guilt for what Westerners have done in the Muslim world. This guilt might translate to a hesitancy to criticize religious governments of that region. The bias might also have roots in an attempt to exhibit tolerance. Recent hijacking and war movies such as *Non-Stop* (2014) and *Left Behind* (2014) present an analogous situation. They show token "good Muslims." That is, they exhibit Muslims dressed stereotypically in skullcaps, which means "scarily" according to established conventions of mainstream Western entertainment, who turn out to be good men. In the same way that this allows both audiences and moviemakers to pat themselves on the back for their "open-minded" realization that not all Muslims are bad, commentators in the West might have subconsciously been doing the same when lamenting the tragic downfall of Morsi and democracy.³⁵

Yet the explanation might be simpler. The alignment of the Media—both Western and Qatari—may have had more to do with story telling. The Arab Spring was a great story. The elevator pitch to a Hollywood director might go something like this: Uprisings of oppressed and impoverished people overthrow powerful, military governments with relatively little violence; democracy—watered by the blood of martyrs—blossoms in the Middle East. It has the makings of many movies in the vein of Gandhi. Good stories need crises, and the threat to the Morsi government, understood as a threat to democracy, could fulfill this role. The narrative, however, loses its shine not to mention

³³ Jesse Brown, "Source: Globe Editorial Board Endorsed Wynne Liberals, Was Overruled," *Canadaland*, June 11, 2014, Accessed January 10, <http://canadalandshow.com/article/source-globe-editorial-board-endorsed-wynne-liberals-was-overruled>.

³⁴ Adam Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1850 [1776]). pp. 319-320.

³⁵ Conversations with Mariam Matar, formerly of the American University in Cairo, provided seeds for the above analysis.

formulaic arc if the storywriters are forced to confess that they were telling the wrong tale all along and that the Arab Spring did not lead to democracy in the first place. Or perhaps even more simply, as one person going by the name “Bob Marley” remarked in the comment section of a NPR piece discussing biases in Al Jazeera: “Sounds like they’ve taken a page out of American cable news ala [*à la*] FOXNEWS or MSNBC... Pick a team, and root for them, no matter the facts of reality.”³⁶

Democracy and Questioning

It is questioning—and more broadly independent thinking—that I wish to emphasize at the end of this piece. It was this that was largely lacking in the media; and whatever democracy is, it is doubtful that it can flourish in the absence of educated, independent thinking and questioning. It is with related thoughts that Thoreau asked:

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.³⁷

All along I have intimated that Western interpretations of the overthrow were largely uncritical and unquestioning. Perhaps they were based on a tacit reversal of Thoreau’s formulation: that we should respect the law and what the majority once agreed upon above all else, including our thoughtful assessments of what is right. To be sure, it is difficult to accept that societies celebrating Martin Luther King and Gandhi would promote anything like this. However, there is a long history of championing ideas without wanting people to adhere to them. American attitudes towards Thoreau are a case in point. He has the status of an American folk hero. Yet few in power advocate practicing what he advised, for this would make war, economic colonialism and exploitation, American dominance and much else impossible.

Thoreau often complained about the laziness of humanity, especially when it came to independent thought, and for such reasons, he also criticized mass media. In *Life Without Principle*, he wrote:

We may well be ashamed to tell what things we have read or heard in our day. I did not know why my news should be so trivial, —considering what one’s dreams and expectations are, why the developments should be so paltry. The news we hear, for the most part, is not news to our genius. It is the stalest repetition.³⁸

³⁶ See comments in Kelly McEvers, “Al-Jazeera Under Fire For Its Coverage Of Egypt,” *National Public Radio*, July 18 2013. Accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/07/18/202970802/Al-Jazeera-Under-Fire-For-Its-Egypt-Coverage>.

³⁷ Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 204.

³⁸ Henry David Thoreau, “Life Without Principle” [1863] in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 204.359.

In *Walden*, he elaborated:

The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications?³⁹

While overstated and perhaps unduly cynical, these passages offer insight into the media's handling of the Morsi overthrow. The ousting was breaking news, yet wrapped in tired plotlines, albeit with the card carrying Islamists cast as the good guys for a change. Seen thus, something less than commitment to conventional storytelling may have led to alignment in the Western media, for apathy and laziness may have also had a role in impeding movement beyond formulaic concepts of democracy and standard narratives.

The West was caught up in its narrative enough to blind itself to the obvious fact that the Morsi government was not democratic, and many of its supporters violent and in some cases rabidly blood thirsty. Al Jazeera displayed something more than laziness insofar as it was, according to some sources, involved not only in skewing facts, but intentionally manufacturing them. Both cases are troubling, first, because we rely on media for most of our information on events in the broader world, especially political ones; and, second, because a free media is meant to be a fundamental part of democracy. Perhaps a major reason why the Arab Spring and the Morsi overthrow are threatening is that they give us glimpses of just how far we all are from genuine democracy, while simultaneously highlighting our lack of commitment to it. Whatever democracy is, it requires more than laziness. It cannot be achieved if, as Thoreau would have said, we give a cheap vote but do nothing in earnest; if we surrender our thinking to others; or if we are more concerned with stock prices, entertainment, shopping and sleep than justice.

Matthew Crippen's research primarily examines intersections between American philosophy, phenomenology and art with an eye to contributing to cognitive science. His publications discuss mind, and also media, politics, Wittgenstein, Frankfurt School, Dewey, James, Thoreau, Nietzsche, history of science, aesthetics, religious faith, freewill and more. While diverse, his work unites around "ecological" approaches that place objects of investigation in world-contexts. Matthew has been pleased to teach an international population of students first at York University in Toronto, Canada, and now at the American University in Cairo. Outside of the academy, he has worked as a musician, mandolin and guitar teacher and gymnastics coach.

³⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*; or, *Life in the Woods*, [1854], in *A Week, Walden, Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America), 397.