

Translating Dissent

Discursive and non-discursive interventions in the political arena are heavily mediated by various acts of translation that enable protest movements to connect across the globe. Focusing on the Egyptian experience since 2011, this volume brings together a unique group of activists who are able to reflect on the complexities, challenges and limitations of one or more forms of translation and its impact on their ability to interact with a variety of domestic and global audiences.

Drawing on a wide range of genres and modalities, from documentary film and subtitling to oral narratives, webcomics and street art, the 18 essays reveal the dynamics and complexities of translation in protest movements across the world. Each unique contribution demonstrates some aspect of the interdependence of these movements and their inevitable reliance on translation to create networks of solidarity. The volume is framed by a substantial introduction by Mona Baker and includes an interview with Egyptian activist and film-maker, Philip Rizk.

With contributions by scholars and artists, professionals and activists directly involved in the Egyptian revolution and other movements, *Translating Dissent* will be of interest to students of translation, intercultural studies and sociology, as well as the reader interested in the study of social and political movements. Online materials, including links to relevant websites and videos, are available at <http://www.routledge.com/cw/baker>. Additional resources for Translation and Interpreting Studies are available on the Routledge Translation Studies Portal: <http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/translationstudies>.

Mona Baker is Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Manchester. She is author of *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (second edition, 2011) and *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2006), and editor or co-editor of several reference works, including the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (second edition, 2009); the four-volume *Critical Concepts: Translation Studies* (2009); and *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (2009). She is Founding Editor of *The Translator* (1995–2013), and Founding Vice-President of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies.

“This is a volume of uncommon urgency, intellectual range, and political importance. Translation, which occupies the crossing point of discourse and power and which affects all networks of word, image and sound, must now stand near the centre of any study of global activism. The richly diverse set of contributors, the activists and scholars, the creators and analysts, located in and out of Egypt, uncover both the conceptual depth and the social force in the contemporary tasks of the dissenting translator.”

Michael H. Levenson, *William B. Christian Professor of English, University of Virginia, USA*

“If you think you know what translation means, think again. This fascinating book uncovers translation as a political act that is negotiated within the spaces that lie between cultures and languages, between the local and the global, between the translatable and the untranslatable. With rich contributions from activist translators, journalists, writers, film makers, scholars, graphic and graffiti artists, all involved in ‘translating’ the Egyptian revolution, Mona Baker has produced a provocative and enlightening volume that will change the way you think about protest, language, culture, politics and translation. It also provides insight into the chaos and complexity of the Egyptian revolution from the perspective of many of the actors involved, highlighting the role art, culture and language play in shaping our perceptions of contemporary political reality, and our understandings of violence, emotions, power, resistance, solidarity, and revolution.”

Dr Cristina Flesher Fominaya, *University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and author of Social Movements and Globalization: How Protests, Occupations and Uprisings are Changing the World (Palgrave 2014)*

“Four years into the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, *Translating Dissent* showcases translation in its broad sense as a new, radical space of intercultural negotiation where discursive and performative representations of revolt in the local and global context take place. By focusing on the recent developments in Egypt and its ongoing contests over freedom of speech and the role of political activism and dissent, the contributors to the volume have brilliantly demonstrated the possibilities offered by translation to create networks of solidarity. The field of translation and cultural studies is that much richer for their efforts.”

Faten I. Morsy, *Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Ain Shams University, Egypt*

“Reading these essays one is struck by the enormous force of creative energy that prevailed during the height of protest in Egypt. The writing underscores the ethical and political role that language, and especially translation, played in broadcasting the multi-media responses to events taking place on the

ground. The writers reveal a newly imagined collective consciousness of an alternative global future. These essays ensure that this vision will remain an active force for human rights and international solidarity.”

Moira Inghilleri, *Director of Translation Studies,
University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

“Rarely has scholarly work on translation been transformed into such an affective experience. The choice to let people write from the streets and from their hearts has resulted in a book that is about much more than translation. This is a book about solidarity, and it is itself an act of solidarity. It tells stories that cannot be found elsewhere, that convey not the meaning of the revolution, but the feeling. Rather than offering us a coherent work on ‘translation’, the book brings the reader into the uncertain world of the Egyptian revolution, in which every form of translation becomes a political act that inspires, moves, depresses and challenges the reader.”

Marianne Maeckelbergh, *Associate Professor of Anthropology,
Leiden University, the Netherlands, and author of The Will
of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement is
Changing the Face of Democracy (Pluto Press 2009)*

“In no other book did the term *translation* acquire its full significance in revolutionary networking that characterizes modern times. With the Egyptian Revolution in its focus, this is a valuable companion to all those who were or will be part of any protest movement around the globe. Brilliant.”

Mourid Barghouti, *Palestinian poet and author of I Saw Ramallah*

“*Translating Dissent* offers a compelling case study of language, art, and the mediating powers of translation during the Egyptian Revolution. The range of authors—from Cairo’s own artists, writers and film-makers to non-Egyptian activists and scholars—details translational strategies in a place-based context of revolution and dissent while expanding our understanding of translation itself. Building from Baker’s illuminating introduction to the micro-studies that follow, the volume reveals translation’s ongoing, if insufficiently recognized role in forging local solidarities as well as global networks.”

Sandra Bermann, *Cotsen Professor of the Humanities & Professor
of Comparative Literature, Princeton University, USA*

“This book offers a radical rethinking of translation and translators. By bringing together scholars of translation studies and social movements with a range of activists, it problematizes the unseen but crucial role of translation in protest and social activism. The reflections of activists on translational

practices in documentary films, subtitling, web comics and street art position translation in its broadest sense as central to protest and dissent across the world.”

Hilary Footitt, *University of Reading, UK*

“The rich studies and personal reflections that Mona Baker has collected here put translation at the dynamic centre of political praxis, while opening up the concept of translation itself, rethinking its meaning and scope by training a wide-angle lens on oppositional activism in and for Egypt since 2011. Examining a varied array of media and translational contexts, the contributors give eloquent voice to the intersections of physicality and narrative, language(s) and (other) visual forms, commitment and sheer determination that Egypt’s many oppositional acts of translation have demonstrated.”

Marilyn Booth, *Khalid bin Abdallah Al Saud Professor in the Study of the Contemporary Arab World, Oriental Institute and Magdalen College, University of Oxford, UK*

“As new and established forms of activism swiftly move between local and global realities, translation, in its many forms, becomes integral to the life of social and political movements. *Translating Dissent* makes visible precisely this kind of deep and deeply influential translation, allowing us to hear its multiple voices.”

Loredana Polezzi, *Cardiff University, UK*

Translating Dissent

Voices *from* and *with* the
Egyptian revolution

Edited by **Mona Baker**

All royalties from the sale of this volume are donated to Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, founded in 1999 by the late Ahmed Seif El-Islam and other human rights activists to defend victims of torture and arbitrary detention in Egypt.

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In memory of Radwa Ashour
Egyptian novelist, scholar, translator, political activist, and
lifetime campaigner for Palestinian rights



1946–2014

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Mona Baker
1 May 2015

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Makhlouf for his 'Can I pretend to protest?!' cartoon, which appears in the essay by Jonathan Guyer

Walid Taher for his 'The Presidential Race' cartoon, which appears in the essay by Jonathan Guyer

18 Moments of clarity

Omar Robert Hamilton



Omar Robert Hamilton is a film-maker, writer and cultural organizer working in documentary and fiction. He helped found Cairo's Mosireen collective and works on the documentation, archiving and the visual record of the Egyptian revolution in various ways: after making dozens of short documentaries he's currently editing a feature documentary from the archive. He helped found the annual Palestine Festival of Literature, which seeks to challenge Israel's various apartheid policies and the international discourse surrounding them. His latest fiction short, *Though I Know the River is Dry*, premiered at Rotterdam and went on to win some good prizes. He writes semi-regularly for Egyptian journalism collective *Mada Masr* and occasionally for the *London Review of Books* blog and is now working on a novel about the parts of the revolution you can't capture in the archive. And once that's done he plans on concentrating on another part of the world for a little while. www.orhamilton.com

It's hard to be honest when talking about heartbreak. Hard to be fair. If you asked me in 2012 if I thought translation was important I'd have replied enthusiastically that it was, of course it was, that forming connections between struggles is essential to the global movement that was taking shape. I'd have added that we are lucky, also, in Egypt, that our struggle, our immediate struggle, feels like it will be won and lost in the domestic arena. That we are not Palestine and that world opinion – in the broadest sense – is useful but not essential to the winning of our battles.

I understand that position still. I think of it fondly. But I'm not sure if I trust it any more. And I'm sure I wouldn't follow it into battle.

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 to 2013 was glorious in its momentary difference, its unexpectedness and its clarity. Those first 18 days, those clear demands, the spectacle was unquestionable and there was no need for translation. He had to go. The great coming together of Egyptian society, of young and old, of secular and (some) Islamists, united under a simple slogan of *leave*. It was appealing. Of course it was. There is nothing simpler than saying *No*, than throwing a rock at your oppressor. But the complexities, the potential fractures, were there to be seen. Did we choose not to see them? Or did we see them and believe they could be overcome? It is so hard to remember now, through the fog of bitterness and pride.

The spectacle, as it was, needed no reinterpretation, needed no middleman; it was undeniable.

We live in a time without imagination. In a global moment without possibility. We live in the end times, at the peak, the pinnacle, preparing for the fall. We live on the brink of annihilation. We live beyond our means. We live without direction. And so those months of 2011 somehow felt inevitable, as young people amassed around the world, fighting for their public spaces, for their rights, for their futures, from Wisconsin to San'a. There is no question that change was needed, and so change had arrived.

And those aspiring changemakers could communicate with each other like never before. Skype calls, YouTube videos, Twitter streams, Indymedias, email threads, bilingual pamphlets, solidarity posters – a new traffic of words and information appeared, flowing for the first time in centuries from both South to North and North to South. A new equality had arrived between the disenfranchised youth of the world.

But as we lurched forward into the months ahead, into the divisions of power and corruptions of promise, into the new constructions of the old realities of militants and Islamists, so language re-entered into the world. The undeniable moment of clarity never lasts. Explanations were asked for, contexts were needed. Our comrades in Spain, in Greece, were confused. What was the role of the army? Why did people cheer it? Are the Brotherhood with the revolution or against it? The forces of the establishment were reorganizing themselves. Obama, his hypocrisy never to be outdone, declares “we must educate our children to become like

young Egyptian people". Vodafone proudly displays his words in Cairo airport. The revolution now is a commodity. It sells us Pepsi and bank accounts and future presidents. The language and image of the revolutionary youth are colonized, commodified, sanitized, and the Fall of Mubarak is ingested, translated and transmitted as something easily comprehensible, something 'good', something in the past, something over. And slowly, and surely, they drew their plans against us.

There has never been a completely successful revolution and there never will be.

* * * *

Several of my colleagues in Mosireen whom I trust and admire have contributed to this volume. They talk, among other things, about the practicalities of the work that was done, that we did, in transmitting what we could of the revolution both inside Egypt and abroad. But I can't stop thinking about what the revolution didn't do, what needs to happen next time. We trusted to the unknown; it was exhilarating, but it was easy. Easy not to know what should come next, to just know that it needs to not be *this*.

In that moment of the unknown the images from Occupy and 15M and the London riots felt like they needed no translation. We were all in this together. But, had we known more, had we read more, had we had a chance to talk and plan and plot, might things have been different? We learned tricks from each other, swapped jokes with each other, gave a moral strength to each other. We dissented together. But we still don't know how to take power. Or even if we want to.

In Athens I learned the meaning of the word *martyr*. μάρτυς. *Witness*. It was September 2011 and the faces on the posters of the fallen that walled Tahrir in those first 18 days were still fresh in our minds. *Martyr*. *Witness*. As in the Arabic. The *shahed*'s roots are in her witnessing. Her seeing and standing and speaking. She dies for her testimony, for her word, for her language of truth.

I felt, then, looking at Alexandros' face, his little memorial in Exarcheia, how much closer these two places must have been before. Athens and Cairo. Egypt and Greece. What centuries of exchange, what countless and unfathomable connections and catalysts passed between these places for millennia. The sea was not a barrier but a rolling mesh that tied the Mediterranean together, a tumultuous, breathing bloodline. And if you crossed it, you stayed; for a while at least. How long would you stay today before the next easyJet out? How will this Athens be translated for you? Its histories and its traumas? How can we understand each other through these Skype calls and YouTube videos? The Mediterranean has been replaced by the English language as our common interface, our first, loose, binding. Arabic and Greek rarely meet any more. We say our struggles are

connected, say that we are connected, but do these phones and planes not make us more divided than ever?

Justice. Revenge. Punishment. Retribution. Vengeance. Vendetta. Blood debt. Which one of these words can fill the throat of the martyr's mother as fully as her crying call for قصاص (*qasas*) when all else is lost? Which will make you weep with her as the funeral procession leaves the cemetery?

I did not cry for Alexandros.

Is dissenting enough? To be in opposition is the fate of the dissenter. To be in compassion. We would not, or at least *I* would not, hold on to power were it taken. Yet we say we cannot ask for liberties from those enthroned, that they must be taken. It is the central paradox. But if we must speak, must dissent, then, yes, we must translate ourselves to better hear each other. We must counter the thoughtless nature of our times. We will never fully win. It will never be over. And we cannot simply go on saying *No*. If there is to be speech, it should be of something new, something that still has no language for the reality that it might create.