Learning and unlearning in struggles for social change: Activism in the continuing Egyptian revolution

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the Faculty of Humanities

2016

Helen Underhill

School of Environment, Education and Development
Global Development Institute
The University of Manchester
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. 5
DECLARATION .............................................................................................................................. 6
COPYRIGHT STATEMENT ............................................................................................................ 6
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................. 7
GLOSSARY ................................................................................................................................ 8
CHAPTER ONE ............................................................................................................................ 11
SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVISM AND LEARNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE ......................... 11
1.1 The Research Context ......................................................................................................... 13
1.2 Research objectives, questions and approach ....................................................................... 15
1.3 Finding, creating and building social change through learning in social movements ......... 17
1.4 Structure of the thesis ........................................................................................................... 20
CHAPTER TWO .......................................................................................................................... 22
LEARNING AND UNLEARNING IN SOCIAL CHANGE .............................................................. 22
2.1 Conceptualising Social Change ............................................................................................ 24
  2.1.1 A normative framework for social change ................................................................. 24
  2.1.2 Power: a theory of relations ....................................................................................... 26
  2.1.3 Revolutionary social change ....................................................................................... 29
  2.1.4 Administering change through liberal ‘democracy’ .................................................... 30
2.2 Moving beyond the state: participating in and creating social change ......................... 32
  2.2.1 Engaging ‘with’ the state: participation and deliberation ........................................... 33
  2.2.2 Towards radical ‘democratic’ alternatives ..................................................................... 35
  2.2.3 Creating change through social movements ............................................................... 38
2.3 Learning in social action ..................................................................................................... 41
  2.3.1 The hegemony of education as ‘schooling’ .................................................................. 42
  2.3.2 Critical consciousness and taking action ..................................................................... 44
  2.3.3 Learning or education? ............................................................................................... 46
  2.3.4 Conceptualising social movement learning ................................................................. 48
  2.3.5 Processes of learning and unlearning ........................................................................... 50
  2.3.6 Learning as and for ‘transformation’ .......................................................................... 53
2.4 Implications of learning through struggle ........................................................................ 54
  2.4.1 Building a critical-political imagination ..................................................................... 54
  2.4.2 Commitment to further action .................................................................................... 56
2.5 Conclusion: a critical approach to learning in struggle .................................................. 58
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................... 61
3.1 Research overview and questions ....................................................................................... 62
3.2 Qualitative Research .......................................................................................................... 63
  3.2.1 Qualitative research as resistance .............................................................................. 63
  3.2.2 Using a case study approach ...................................................................................... 63
  3.2.3 Qualitative methods ..................................................................................................... 66
  3.2.4 Participants and interviews ......................................................................................... 67
  3.2.5 Partially participating observations .............................................................................. 68
  3.2.6 Researching online ....................................................................................................... 69
3.3 Analysing, organising and synthesising data ....................................................................... 71
  3.3.1 Interpreting and analysing interview data .................................................................... 71
  3.3.2 Drawing conclusions and generalisations .................................................................... 74
Replaying History: from Revolution to Militarism and back again
4.1 Contemporary Egypt: colonialism, revolution and rulers
4.1.1 Colonialism and royalty
4.1.2 Nasser: The modern-day pharaoh
4.1.3 Sadat and economic liberalisation
4.1.4 The Mubarak era
4.2 The 25 January revolution and continuing struggle
4.2.1 18 days of occupation
4.2.2 Post-Mubarak cracks and fault lines
4.2.3 30 June protests, 3 July coup and the ‘counter revolution’
4.3 Divided activists in the struggle
4.3.1 Three faces of the revolution: two dominant narratives and the revolutionary struggle
4.3.2 Islamists and the pro-Morsi agenda
4.3.3 Nationalists and the populist support for Sisi
4.3.4 The struggle of the revolutionaries
4.3.5 UK-based activism during the continuing struggle
4.3.6 Voting from within the UK
4.4 Conclusion: The struggle to break with the past

CHAPTER FIVE
5.1 Learning through active participation with others
5.1.1 Learning through difference and diversity
5.1.2 Learning by developing a point of view
5.2 Individual and personal processes of learning
5.2.1 Learning by witnessing and observing
5.2.2 Learning through self-directed enquiry in the search for new and deeper knowledge
5.3 Learning and unlearning through critical reflection
5.4 Conclusions: learning and unlearning in social action

CHAPTER SIX
6.1 Deepening understandings of power and discourse
6.1.1 “It is poverty and injustice”
6.1.2 “You didn’t realise how Egypt worked”
6.1.3 “If you say it enough, you believe any lie”
6.2 Institutions and instruments of democracy
6.2.1 “That’s why it’s a dictatorship and that’s what democracy is about”
6.2.2 “Take him out by the ballot box”
6.3 Learning democratic alternatives
6.3.1 “We need hundreds of years to teach the meaning of democracy”
6.3.2 “Everyone had a space”
6.4 Conclusions: Learning for progressive social change?
ABSTRACT

Helen Underhill
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the Faculty of the Humanities
The University of Manchester

Learning and unlearning in struggles for social change: Activism in the continuing Egyptian revolution

This thesis investigates the effects of participating in activism on the people who struggle for social change. Using a critical pedagogical framework, the study contributes to the theorisation of ‘social movement learning’ by drawing distinctions between processes, outcomes and implications of learning, and by developing the concepts ‘(un)learning’ and ‘pedagogical adversaries’. The research examines how activists who participate in social and political action develop different perspectives of social change. The conclusions draw on data collected throughout 2014, specifically interviews with, and observations of, UK-based Egyptian activists who engaged in social action during the continuing 25 January revolution between 2011-2014. As activists reflect on their understandings in the context of revolution and counter-revolution, coup d’etat, elections, strikes and various forms of social and political change, they reveal many ‘pedagogical entry points’. The findings illustrate that social movements are continuous processes and sites of important, rich and potentially transformative learning because they generate pedagogical moments through which activists can engage with and develop critical perspectives of the way the world is and should be. Analysis of social movement learning as (un)learning exposes the cumulative and continuing nature of learning and unlearning, and generates important insights into how social movements challenge established ‘knowledge’ and ‘truths’ to create progressive alternatives. Drawing on critical and radical theories of social change, the thesis demonstrates the importance of continuing to question conceptualisations of social change and of a political imagination that understands the pedagogical potential of disjuncture and challenge.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Uma Kothari and Susie Miles, for all their support, encouragement and advice, and belief in this work and my ability to produce something exciting. I wish to extend sincere thanks to Diana Mitlin and Sam Hickey, both of whom offered valuable guidance at different stages during the research, and to Tanja Müller and Solava Ibrahim for their continued support.

Completing this PhD in four years whilst working has been a rewarding experience, not without its challenges. I cannot imagine completing this without Sophie Breese: from our first meeting on a train in Egypt to the most recent time spent at her house in France as I worked, I have been inspired by so many of our conversations (thank you for reminding me, post viva, of that important moment in Star Wars when Yoda said to Luke, “you must unlearn what you have learned”!). As well as some incredible friends, new and old, near and far, who have been interested, caring and supportive in their own ways, I am indebted to the Evans family for much needed tea, a quiet space to work, constant encouragement & invaluable DIY skills. Sincere thanks also to Jessica, Niki, Róisín, Rachel, Mel and Katie for continued intellectual and emotional support during my time at Manchester.

I am grateful to my family for supporting my decision to leave a successful career in teaching to embark on a Master’s degree and then the PhD. I must acknowledge my grandparents - Flora and Reg - who first inspired my interest in travel and commitment to social justice that have undoubtedly shaped this work. To Pops, I can’t thank you enough… Thanks also to you and Libs for a quiet place to write, for proof reading and all the rest. Mum, thank you for encouraging me to enjoy the virtual quiet space in ‘The Archers’! And to my husband, Gareth - it’s done! Thank you so, so much for knowing when I needed you to make me laugh, give me a hug or make me take a break, particularly in the final weeks. Here’s to all our adventures to come…

Most importantly, this thesis would not have been possible without the participation and commitment of the people I met during this research who gave up their time and willingly shared their experiences with me. I am indebted to their belief that this was a story that needed to be told and I hope, in some way, this thesis enables their voices and struggle to be heard. As well as the many people I met within the UK, I am also hugely grateful to friends, new and old, in Egypt for their kindness, support and remarkable insights.

This thesis is dedicated to those who are a continuous source of inspiration: the people who continue the struggle for freedom and social justice in Egypt and beyond.
### GLOSSARY

**Al-Ittihadiya**  
Presidential palace in Cairo, site of many protests, particularly in June 2013 against Mohamed Morsi’s presidency.

**Abaya**  
Long over-clothing garment worn by many Muslim women.

**Abdel Fattah El-Sisi**  
Appointed Defence Minster Mohamed Morsi. Member of SCAF. Elected president in May 2014, inaugurated in June 2014.

**Ahmed Shafiq**  
Former Prime Minster under Hosni Mubarak. SCAF leader. Losing candidate in the 2012 presidential election.

**Anti-coup**  
A term used to denote UK-based activists who specifically mobilised post-30June/3July, predominantly in support of Mohamed Morsi as the elected leader, though also specifically against the massacre at Raba’a in August 2013.

**Freedom and Justice Party**  
The name for the political organisation established by Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the aftermath of the 25 January revolution. The organisation was banned (again) after Sisi’s election in 2014.

**Hamdeen Sabahi**  
Secular left / opposition politician. Attempted to forge alliance with Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 to prevent SCAF from winning election. Stood for election in 2013 against Sisi, losing with just 3% of the vote.

**Ikwan**  
Arabic name given to the Muslim Brotherhood.

**Islamist**  
Specifically denotes supporters of Mohamed Morsi and the notion of political institutions being guided by Islam. This does not mean that all Islamists were specifically supporters of Mohamed Morsi or the Muslim Brotherhood. Other Islamist candidates (e.g. Abdel Fatouh) were also popular among Islamists.

**Kefaya**  
Secular, leftist and pro-democracy movement established in 2004, particularly focusing on protesting against the intention for Gamal Mubarak to succeed his father as president. It is an important movement in contemporary Egyptian political history though it has been criticised for being too middle class in its membership (Abdelrahman 2012).
**Khaled Said**
Egyptian man, murdered by security services in 2010. The incident sparked the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page, established by Wael Ghonim.

**Mohammed El-Baradei**
Egyptian scholar and UN diplomat turned (temporary) politician. In the weeks leading up to and during the Egyptian revolution, he was touted as a potential future leader. El-Baradei took the position of vice-president following the 2013 coup but resigned following the massacre at Rab’a a month later.

**Mohammed Mahmoud**
November 2011, massacre of revolutionary activists on Sharia (street) Mohammed Mahmoud that meets Tahrir Square. The massacre remains a source of division between secular and Islamist activists because Muslim Brotherhood supporters did not go out in support of the activists at this time.

**Mohamed Morsi**
Mohamed Morsi, member of Muslim Brotherhood, was elected president in June 2012 and overthrown one year later in 2013. He has been detained by the regime since 3 July 2013, awaiting sentencing for ‘inciting violence’.

**Muslim Brotherhood (MB)**
The Islamist organisation was established in 1928. Often referred to as ‘The MB’, the movement built grassroots support particularly among the poorest communities. Its political arm, The Freedom and Justice Party, was banned in 2014.

**National Democratic Party (NDP)**
Founded in 1978 by Anwar Sadat and most recently lead by Hosni Mubarak. Dissolved in April 2011 after the Egyptian revolution.

**Raba’a**
Refers to the massacre of over 1000 Morsi / MB supporters at various sit-ins across Cairo on 14 August 2013, the largest of which was at the Raba’a Al-Adiwaya square.

**Revolutionaries**
A term predominantly used to refer to the ‘youth’ and activists who continue to mobilise in support of the 25 January revolution and the slogan ‘bread, freedom and social justice’. Left-leaning.

**Revolutionary socialists**
Specific movement in Egypt that emerged in the 1980s and is often associated with campaigning against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The revolutionary socialists supported Morsi in the final stage of the 2012 election (though after much debate and with much upset by many of its members).
| **SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces)** | The statutory body of the Egyptian army. Established in 1954 by Gamal Abdel Nasser and has roots in the Free Officers Movement which led a military coup / revolution in 1952. The 20-30 military leaders of SCAF are embedded in government and business institutions, though when moving into politics they are independent candidates. |
| **Secular** | Activists who do not have an affiliation to either Islamist or nationalist agendas or who specifically mobilise for a distancing of institutional (army) and religious control over government and politics. |
| **Tamarod** | Credited with leading the 30 June protests and issuing the first request for Morsi’s resignation on 1 July 2013. |
| **‘The 18 days’** | A common term used to refer to the 18 days of uprisings (for example, protests, demonstrations, walk-outs, sit-ins) that began on 25 January 2011 and ended with Mubarak’s resignation on 11 February 2011. |
| **‘The Blue Bra girl’** | Incident in December 2011 when a young woman was photographed and videoed being dragged across Tahrir Square by security forces. Her underwear was exposed. |
| **25 January Revolution** | The 18 days of uprisings that took place across Egypt between 25 January and 11 February 2011. The focal point of the uprisings was the occupation (sit-in) in Tahrir Square in Cairo. The revolution ended with Hosni Mubarak’s resignation after 30 years as ruler. |
| **6 April Movement** | Founded in 2008 in support of labour strikes among textile workers. |
| **30 June/3 July** | Denotes the 4 day period in 2013 that sparked the civil unrest and sectarian violence. On 30 June 2013, mass protests in Tahrir Square against Mori’s presidency were called on the year anniversary of his election. On the 1st July, the army gave Morsi a 48 hour ultimatum. He was removed by the army (led by Defence Chief, Sisi) on 3 July. |
Activists’ accounts of participating in the 25 January revolution in Egypt suggest it was a moment of extraordinary personal transformation and the beginning of a long process of social change for the country and its people. Even as they watched millions of Egyptians demonstrating in squares and on streets across Egypt, commentators and scholars attempted to articulate the significance of the events and of the demise of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak at the hands of the Egyptian people. Analyses explored the events from a range of perspectives: the extent to which 25 January was a ‘revolution’ or a struggle for reform (Bayat 2013); the significance of Internet communication in the uprisings (Aoragh and Alexander 2011; Castells 2012); and through theories of social movements and networks (Gunning and Baron 2013; della Porta 2014; Grand 2014; Costello, Jenkins and Aly 2015). Personal accounts from high profile activists such as Wael Ghonim (2012) and Ahdaf Soueif (2012) brought the struggle to life for the millions across the world who were enthralled by the Egyptians’ calls for ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’.

Egyptian academic, Mona Baker (2016:2) noted that, “the momentous and traumatic events of the past few years are forcing [us] to rethink everything”. However, despite the enormous popular interest in the 25 January revolution, and the widespread agreement that the path of Egypt’s struggle is important to Egypt, the region and globally, gaps remain in how the struggle has been documented, analysed and theorised. One of those gaps relates specifically to Baker’s reference to ‘rethinking’: through this research, I contribute a rare perspective of the continuing Egyptian struggle through accounts and analyses of how and why UK-based activists have changed through their participation by drawing on activists’ experiences not only during the 18 days of uprisings in 2011 but in the three years that followed. Through the analysis of activists’ learning - including their ‘rethinking’ - within this contemporary case of revolutionary struggle, I explore conceptualisations of social change, reflecting in particular on theories of democracy, education and social movements. I draw on critical approaches to social change to argue
for greater understanding of the impact of revolutionary struggle on the people by whom it was and continues to be created and lived.

This research examines learning within the context of a social movement and social action. It explores how and what activists learn, and reflects on the implications of learning on their future engagement with struggles for social change. The transformative potential of learning within social movements is increasingly evident within the small but growing body of work that examines ‘social movement learning’ (see Hall and Turay 2006). Whether defined as ‘old’ or ‘new’, formalised or spontaneous, for the individuals who gather in collective action, social movements are sites (Welton 1993) of important and rich learning (Hall and Turay 2006). Activists learn informally and incidentally (Foley 1999), in different pedagogical spaces (Schugurensky and Myers 2003), at different paces and over time (Ollis 2011). Insights from adult education and, in particular, critical pedagogy, established that, by participating in social action, activists learn emancipatory and oppositional practices (Foley 1999), gain knowledge of the structural causes related to their own experience of poverty (Endresen and Von Kotze 2005), and develop pedagogies that inspire collective thinking and active listening (Welton 2002; Hall 2012). Acknowledging that learning within a movement can be transformational for individuals (Mezirow 1981, 1990) and society (Finger 1989), this investigation examines the relationship between ‘social movement learning’ and activists’ understanding of, and participation in, processes of social change.

The dominant approach to theorising social movements focuses on the movement as a response to particular political conditions, and analyses of movement outcomes in relation to impact on politics and policy (Giugni 2008; Bosi and Uba 2009). The focus of this research on activists’ learning develops a framework through which to understand the relationship between activists’ participation and their future engagement in struggles for social change, whether a social movement or action, political debate or ‘democracy’. By examining the impact of learning on activists’ trajectories, the research also contributes to a much-neglected theme within the study of social movements and social movement learning. I show that insights into how and what activists learn as they participate in moments and processes of social change can contribute to better understanding of “capacity-building strategies for democratic deliberation and decision-
making, and to the development of a more democratic and educative political culture” (Lerner and Schugerensky 2005:np).

Although popular educators such as Paulo Freire have shaped critical conceptions of education since the 1960s and 1970s, academic interest in adult education within the specific context of social movements garnered more attention after the mid-1990s (Harley 2012). Despite growing interest in and recognition of ‘learning in social action’ (Foley 1999), social movement learning remains without a clear definition (Chovanec, Lange and Ellis 2008). As a field, social movement learning is ‘under-conceptualised’ and includes empirical studies that lack depth, detail or a common vocabulary that could enable movements to learn from each other (Hall and Turay 2006:12). One objective of this study, therefore, is to contribute to the theorisation of social movement learning through an enquiry into activists’ learning about, understanding of and participation in social change, and through a theoretical enquiry into the connections between social movement learning and activist trajectories. A key contribution of this thesis is my conceptualisation of (un)learning and the links I build to radical theories of democracy that expose the pedagogical potential of contestation and challenge.

1.1 The Research Context

On 11 February 2011, after 30 years as Egypt’s ruler, Hosni Mubarak resigned the presidency, succumbing to the pressure of 18 days of mass demonstrations, in what is most widely referred to as the 25 January revolution. Although there are many justifications for preferring the term ‘uprising’ (see Achcar 2013), I intentionally refer to the 18 days of uprisings as the ‘25 January revolution’ throughout this thesis for two key reasons. First, by using the terminology used by the activists themselves, I aim to give voice to those who try to retain the agency and spirit of resistance created during that specific period in 2011 (“it was a revolution par excellence” Amira, April 2014). The second reason is theoretical: I acknowledge the complexity of the term ‘revolution’ (I reflect briefly on this in section 2.1.4) but align myself with theories that stress the continuing and evolving process of revolution and reject the idea that the revolution was ‘complete’ when Mubarak resigned. ‘The revolution’, therefore, refers to both the events
associated within the 18 days and the struggle that has continued in the five years since 2011.

Although the central square in downtown Cairo, Midan Tahrir, remains a symbol of the revolution, even for people who were not there during the 18 days, Egyptians living across the world simultaneously created their own Tahrir spaces and moments, convening on embassies, media buildings and public spaces to show their solidarity with the protests in Egypt. However, the revolution did not end with Mubarak’s downfall and, since January 2011, Egyptians have experienced mass demonstrations and uprisings, constitutional referendums, two presidential elections, massacres, increased sectarian violence, mass imprisonment, trials and death sentences, a military coup and a counter-revolution. During this time, Egyptian activists within Egypt and across the world have continued to participate in individual and collective forms of activism related to various dimensions of the struggle, despite the political context under military rule presenting increased risk to their safety (Dunne 2015).

While many within news media, bloggers and the academy observed, commented on and analysed the 18 days during January and February 2011, there is much less detail or discussion of the continuing Egyptian struggle - the period after Mubarak’s resignation. Despite significant unrest in the four years since Mubarak’s downfall, evidence of activists’ participation in the struggle after 11 February 2011 is sparse, and there has been little attention paid to the impact of activism during and since 25 January on the activists themselves, or their understandings, perspectives or engagement with the struggle. This research, therefore, provides important empirical evidence of activism during and since 25 January, and does so through a theoretical framework that explores connections between activism and progressive conceptualisations of social change.

More broadly, this research is set in a contemporary moment where people across the world continue to engage in struggles for progressive social change. 2011 marked “the great revival of protest” (Žižek 2012:12): democracy and anti-neoliberalism movements swept the Middle East; movements like Occupy, and anti-austerity activists in Spain and Greece, transcended national borders; and, in the months that followed, movements for social change emerged in Hong Kong, Ukraine, and across the world. Since 2011, the “emergent new forms of politicisation…have expressed an extraordinary antagonism to
the instituted – and often formally democratic – forms of governing” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:2). The Egyptian revolution is one case through which to examine this important period of change where ordinary people are, in Žižek’s (2012) words, ‘Dreaming Dangerously’.

1.2 Research objectives, questions and approach

The central aim of this research is to understand how social movements impact the people who participate. As well as providing empirical evidence of activism related to the continuing Egyptian struggle, it assists the theorisation of social movement learning. Being grounded in critical understandings of social change and learning (for example through critical pedagogy and radical conceptualisations of democracy), the theoretical framework that informs this study raises specific questions of activists’ learning related to broader intersecting themes such as democracy, power, social justice and education.

The overarching research question addressed in this study is: In what ways and with what effect does activism impact understandings of, and engagement with, processes of social change? Three sub-questions provide more specific lines of enquiry and, subsequently, shaped the presentation of analysis in this dissertation:

1) How do activists learn by participating in social action?
2) In what ways does learning in social action shape activists’ conceptualisation of social change?
3) In what ways does learning in social action impact activists’ engagement with processes of social change?

As I explain in Chapter Two, in order to address these questions, I build a theoretical framework that reflects on conceptualisations of social change, particularly theories of democracy, education and, later in the chapter, learning in social movements. Critical approaches to education have prompted questions about the role of schools, education and learning in processes of social change (see Dewey 1916; Freire 1970; Giroux 1991; Carr and Hartnett 1996) and highlighted the potential of alternative forms and spaces of learning. This line of enquiry is aligned with critiques of the dominant narrative of liberal
democracy and gained traction from alternative and radical approaches to democracy, ‘the political’ (Mouffe 2005) and normative frameworks of social justice (Young 1990; Fraser 2003; Honneth 2003).

I examine the research questions through the case of UK-based activists who participated in activism related to the Egyptian revolution, gathering their accounts and reflections of their involvement and of events prior to, during and after 25 January 2011 until the election of president Sisi in 2014. Two key qualitative methods were employed: I completed interviews with 28 UK-based Egyptians who took part in social activism during and since the 25 January revolution in Egypt, and, simultaneously conducted participant observation at demonstrations and events related to the Egyptian struggle throughout 2014.

Reseaching social movements involves complex ethical dilemmas and questions around researcher positionality (see Gillan and Pickerill 2012). I reflect on this in more depth in Chapter Three but must acknowledge that, as a qualitative study using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990), exploratory in design and implementation, data and analysis are informed by the subjectivities of the participants and the researcher, and cannot be generalised to all activists or all Egyptians. Chapter Two outlines the theoretical perspective that shapes the analysis, and I make the case for a normative understanding of social change where it is possible to make judgements of what kind of change is required. However, because this research seeks to understand what and how activists learn, I draw on conversations with activists who hold a range of positions. This required me to reflect on my own positionality and to draw from the data insights that can raise potential new avenues for enquiries into the conceptualisation of social movement learning and its relationship with activist trajectories and ideas of social change.

The focus of the first sub-question is social movement learning, specifically processes of learning that happen as people engage in ‘social action’ (Foley 1999). Through the activists’ accounts of their participation, and through observations of online activism and at demonstrations and events, I explore how they engaged during the struggle, taking into account their reasons for participating, when they became involved and how.
The second sub-question continues to examine social movement learning but turns to what activists learn through their activism. The research uncovered many dimensions of learning that could be linked to learning about social change (for example, learning about the significance of history and Egypt’s colonial past, or about the role of religion and of gender in Egyptian society). However, as I explain in Chapter Two, this thesis focuses on what and how activists learn that reveals learning for a progressive form of social change. Given the limitations of this dissertation, to reflect on all dimensions of learning would render analyses of learning for social change inadequate.

To explore activists’ trajectories as actors within processes of social change, the focus of the third sub-question, I examine the connections between the processes and content of learning that might impact commitment to future activism. While I acknowledge that the significant gap in understanding the outcomes of social movement activism (Giugni 1999; Bosi and Uba 2009) may be because it is problematic to attribute cause and effect to movement participation and future activist behaviours, a pedagogical framework provides scope for investigation (see Foley 1999). Having introduced the research questions, the remainder of this chapter introduces the concept of social movement learning and provides an outline of the thesis.

1.3 Finding, creating and building social change through learning in social movements

Social change has been analysed from many perspectives, arguably with most emphasis on explanations that depict society as being on a path of continual progression (Hallinan 1997). Theorising social change, despite all the complexities, inevitably seeks to explain the rate, direction and source of change through explanations such as modernisation, globalisation, migration or democratisation. While such theorising has generated important insights that have paved the way for new or different questions, some approaches have tended towards a reductionism that forecloses alternatives, subsequently narrowing the perspectives to a limited range of, or emphasis on, specific factors. For instance, the dominance of historical and structural analyses that explain why a particular moment or manifestation of social change (as with revolution) happened in that way and at that time are problematic in two ways: they are less able to uncover the intersecting
factors that are crucial for understanding the ‘moment’ or to understanding the dynamic nature of social change in a continuously evolving social context. One potential alternative framework for understanding social change emerges within the study of social movements, in particular the critical and cultural approach to social movements that recognises them as “public spaces for thinking new thoughts, activating new actors, generating new ideas, in short, constructing new intellectual projects” (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:161).

Conceptualisations of social movements in processes of social change have been dominated by social psychology and historical sociology as approaches to understand collective behaviour (Blumer 1969) and the enabling conditions and constraints (McCarthy and Zald 1977) of movement mobilisation. The theoretical and empirical enquiry into social movements has established the significant role people play in social change, though with a recognised emphasis of structure over agency. For instance, when social movement theories explain social change through analyses of the structural conditions, they generate limited understanding of the people within the movement or of the implications of their participation (Giugni 1999, 2008; Bosi and Uba 2009; Van Dyke and Dixon 2013). This gap persists, despite evidence that when ordinary people engage in social movement activism, they develop a ‘cognitive praxis’, creating new knowledge through experience (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). With conceptual roots that connect social movement theory to adult education (Chovanec, Lange and Ellis 2008), the study of social movement learning addresses this gap in understanding by seeking to capture the role of activism in the creation of new knowledge, a ‘counter-power’ and of an alternative future where hope is made “possible” (Hall, Clover, Crowther and Scandrett 2012:xv). It builds on the contributions of critical educators who argue that, "for social change to be possible, people need to be willing to part with their habits. They might need to learn to look at the world in different ways" (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015:272). This research furthers understandings of how these changes happen.

Progressive approaches to social change expose injustices and challenge unequal power relations, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two. In relation to education and learning, these approaches are underpinned by radical critiques of capitalism and the work of critical theorists who connect education to concerns of “how the world is, how the world ought to be and how we can change the conditions of the world” (Vanwynsberghe and Herman
2015:269, emphasis in original). For example, Apple (2003) highlights the deep injustices associated with an education system that determines who has ‘legitimate’ knowledge and seeks to ensure students are educated in the vision of a globally competitive market place and the traditional social context of home. Social movement learning, a relatively recent development in the field of critical and radical adult education, enables exploration of learning in “social action for the purpose of defending and/or affirming a shared vision of social justice” (Kilgore 1999:192).

Becoming conscious of our place in the world and our relation to others is an essential dimension of social justice (Young 1990; Forst 2007). It raises questions of the kind of power that expose structures of oppression and injustice. By becoming critically consciousness of injustice, power and oppression in relation to the lived experience and being compelled to act - experiencing ‘conscientization’ (Freire 1970) - activists are better equipped to mount resistance and challenge different forms of oppression. But just as critical consciousness is a continuing process that generates new understandings in response to new events, situations and learning (Chovanec and Lange 2007), the activist experience shapes visions of what social change is, should or could be. Analysing social movement learning, therefore, also requires researchers to question how learning in social action shapes activists’ perceptions of what constitutes social change and the kind of social change they might struggle for. In other words, investigations into social movement learning provide a framework through which to conceptualise the ways in which activism impacts activists’ understandings of, and engagement with, critical and progressive understandings and processes of social change.

Studies of social movement learning show that movements, social action and activism are spaces and processes for developing ideas and skills (for a useful ‘state of the field’ report, see Hall and Turay 2006). In his seminal work with community groups and social movements in Brazil, Australia and Zimbabwe, Foley’s (1999) ‘Learning in Social Action’, drew from Freire’s emancipatory framework and emphasised contestation and struggle as sites of learning, and showed that activists learn and unlearn as they participate in discussion, debate and reflection. Foley (1999:54) showed how women’s active participation within a community project in Australia engendered informal and incidental learning, and argued the “whole experience of participating” is “an important learning process”. Adult educators such as Foley argue that, through activism and
campaigning, activists develop new knowledge and skills as they ‘learn on the job’, even when their participation in activism was ‘accidental’ (Ollis 2008). In Egypt, for example, during the 18 days of the 25 January revolution, activists gained various practical skills in organising, advocacy and publicity – learning that was informal and incidental (English and Mayo 2012).

Social movement learning provides a lens through which to explore the implications of participating in social action on activists’ capacities and practices as well as their perspectives and understandings. The theoretical basis of this thesis resides in critical understandings of social change, and the commitment to developing new insights into the implications of learning in struggle and social action: how do activists perceive social change? To what extent and in what ways does activism shape understandings and practices of engagement with social change? What is the relationship between social movement learning and critical approaches to social change? To respond to these questions, I analyse the reflections of UK-based activists who participated in social action related to the Egyptian revolution and continuing struggle. The thesis examines how these activists participated, what and how they learned, and explores the connections between processes and outcomes of learning within the context of a social movement and the subsequent shifting, changing or developing understandings of social change.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised in nine chapters. In Chapter Two, I explore different perspectives and theorisations of social change. The first section reflects on the broader theories that shape how social change is understood, before establishing the limitations of theories that emphasise the state as the focus of creating change. Section two turns to agency-oriented approaches to social change that foreground the contribution of people. In this section, I reflect on more progressive conceptualisations of social change offered by participatory, deliberative and radical democracy, and of social movements and social action. In section three, I turn to the question of learning for social change, responding to the noted gap in understandings of the impact of movements on activists. The final section examines the implications of activism in more detail to understand how participating in struggle
impacts understandings of, and engagement with, social change. As critical dimensions of how social change has been theorised and understood, democracy and power are recurring themes throughout Chapter Two.

Chapter Three details the research design and methodology, including a discussion of the qualitative approach and brief accounts of the preparation, fieldwork and analysis stages. Chapter Four provides the overview of the case study, Egypt’s modern historical, economic and social context, and the period of revolutionary change between 2011-2014. It concludes with an overview of themes that are particularly pertinent to understanding the case. Brief appendices that include details of the interview participants and a timeline of events associated with Egypt’s revolutionary context supplement these two chapters.

The three empirical chapters - Chapters Five, Six and Seven - address each sub-question in turn, building a response to the overarching research question and objective. Chapter Five examines how activists learned, detailing the many processes of learning that activists experienced through their participation. I explore the ways in which people learn through collective and individual experiences of participating in different forms of activism. Chapter Six focuses on the content of learning by examining the changing perspectives of social change. Activists revealed new and shifting understandings as they reflected on issues of democracy, power, politics and social justice, themes that are explored further in the discussion chapter. In the final empirical chapter, I examine how participating (and learning) in the movement has impacted the activists from three key perspectives: the personal effects; the impact on the way activists participate in social movements; and, the implications of learning in struggle on engagement with politics.

Although there is some overlap between the three empirical chapters due to the way in which activists themselves talk about the struggle, they are reflective of the overall learning process: I move from what activists did and how they learned, to the outcomes of these processes of learning and, finally, the implications of their learning. In this way, a key theoretical contribution of the thesis is advanced: learning in social action is a continuing process, involving cumulative learning moments that continue to shape activists’ reflections, enquiries and trajectories.
Chapter Eight provides the analysis of learning in struggles for social change and develops the theoretical contribution of the thesis. I bring findings from the three empirical chapters together to reflect on the theorisation of social movement learning and understandings of democracy and education as processes of social change. I outline my concepts of (un)learning and pedagogical adversaries, and develop an account of the ‘political imagination’. The thesis concludes in Chapter Nine with a final reflection on the wider theoretical implications of the research.

To conclude, this research aims to understand the impact of social movement participation on people who struggle for social change. It draws on a broader context of uprisings, protests and mass movements, and significant division within Egypt, to explore what, how and with what effect activists learn. In the next chapter, I provide the theoretical context for this research.

CHAPTER TWO
LEARNING AND UNLEARNING IN SOCIAL CHANGE

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

(Hamilton 2016:243).

The 2011 Egyptian revolution and continuing struggle is arguably a symbol of the possibilities for social change that can be created and driven by ordinary people. As individuals and groups gathered together, calling for ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’, and resisted dominance and oppression at the hands of the state, whether through the police, military or hired thugs (Kandil 2012), they exemplified the axiom
‘power of the people’ by forcing the resignation of a 30-year autocratic ruler. While the important role of ‘the people’ in processes of social change has been widely theorised (for example, through accounts of ‘bottom-up’ development, participatory democracy and social movements), theories of revolutions lean towards analyses of the structural conditions within the state that brought about a particular type of revolutionary moment. Similarly, dominant approaches to democracy emphasise processes, procedures and instruments of democracy (see Rawls 1968), and have contributed to the representation of the Egyptian revolution as one stage of an inevitable process of liberalism and democratisation.

The theoretical framework outlined in this chapter explores the role of ordinary people in processes of social change. I take as my starting point that there are different forms of resistance “against different forms of power” (Foucault 1982:780), and that there can be greater understanding of the different ways people resist and create social change. In other words, this investigation is grounded in the notion that analysing social movements exposes different forms of power, and that connecting strategies of resistance to their relations of power is key to understanding progressive social change.

This chapter is organised into four sections. Section 2.1 discusses dominant approaches to social change, focusing on theories that centre on the state such as revolution and liberal democracy. This is followed by theories of social change that centre on the contribution of ‘the people’, including alternative approaches to democracy. The second half of the chapter examines the implications of social action. Through critical pedagogy and insights from adult educators, I explore how participating in activism develops an “understanding [of] relations of power and domination” that incorporates “a critique of dominant ideologies and discourses and the articulation of oppositional ideologies and discourses” (Foley 1999:17).

Through this framework and the reflection on the Egyptian case, I develop a range of theoretical contributions. A key area of theoretical development relates specifically to theories of learning in social movements, and of the impact of movement participation on activists. I also add to conceptualisations of social change in the contemporary period when critiques of the disparity between the concept of democracy and its material reality (Dunn 1979; Shapiro 2003; Wainwright 2003) are increasingly relevant. Empirically, this
theoretical framework contributes to the understanding of Egypt’s revolution by exposing how activists perceive the struggle and their role in creating change.

2.1 Conceptualising Social Change

Conceptually, ‘social change’ can be used simply to describe day-to-day ‘development’ of society, or it can imbibe everything meaningful about a certain kind of change. In other words, ‘social change’ can mean nothing or everything. In this section, I introduce the framework for social change that I develop in this thesis. I adopt a critical approach to conceptualising social change and, by engaging with theories of power, democracy and revolution, I argue that studies of social change should be understood and theorised with a normative perspective of how the world should be. The chapter demonstrates that this can be advanced through examining the pedagogical nature of how people participate in processes of social change.

2.1.1 A normative framework for social change

Contemporary liberal democracy in the form of elected representatives, Fukuyama (1989:4) contended in his ‘End of History’ thesis, ‘triumphed’ at the end of the cold war and was acknowledged as the “final form of human government”. Despite widespread criticism among Left and liberal thinkers (Dean 2014), the perception of liberal, representative democracy as the most desirable and legitimate form of government was evident in analyses of the uprisings that swept the Middle East and North African (MENA) region in 2011, where commentators and theorists reflected on ‘The Arab Spring’ as the long-awaited beginning of democratisation (see Grand 2014; della Porta 2014) that would finally see an end to Middle East exceptionalism that depicted the region as a “monolithic, fundamentally static, and thus ‘peculiar’ entity” (Bayat 2010:3). Although Fukuyama’s supporters acknowledged criticisms that he was speaking from within the hegemony of (American) neoliberalism (Mount 2012), they were successful in producing a powerful discourse of liberal, representative democracy as the only desirable model for creating social change.
In this context, the term social change became synonymous with social, political and economic development within the framework of liberalism. Social change, in this narration, would be defined by economic development and progress towards structures of government that enabled and promoted capitalism. However, enacting radical and critical analyses of the neoliberal project, and in response to the hegemony of the “liberal idyll, …movements and mobilisations exploded in 2011, and continue to smoulder and flare” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:3). These anti-liberalism movements highlighted the “cynicism and arrogance of those in power” and sought “dignity amid the suffering of humiliation” (Castells 2012:3). The many spaces, practices and actors associated with resisting domination show that, in order to achieve ‘authentic’ social change (Freire 1970; Allman 1999), there must be a continued search for progressive alternatives to the “highly compromised forms of democratic governance” that emerged within capitalism (Allman 1999:2).

The notion of justice is key to liberal and progressive approaches to social change because, at its most basic level, the conceptualisation of what is ‘just’ shapes the rules that determine how society is organised. Contrary to the Rawlsian liberal conception of justice that avoids making any assumption of what is good, alternatives are grounded in the idea that there must be a critical and normative engagement with the world; in other words, there must be a judgement made of what is right or wrong. Bringing about socially just change requires reflecting on the normative ideals of a society and imagining a different social reality (Young 1990), an imagination that is not considered within liberal theories of justice that focus on end-results through what people have, whether rights, duties, wealth or resources. Offering an alternative to the distributive paradigm, critical theories of justice advanced questions related to who: issues of recognition become fundamental (Young 1990; Honneth 2003).

Issues of cultural recognition and identity are indeed important within a theory of justice but Fraser (1995:92) argues this cannot be at the expense of addressing issues related to class and socioeconomic exploitation. In a similar way, radical democratic theorists also advocate a more vigorous commitment to the struggle between Left and Right, and a renewed commitment to a socially just oriented version of politics and democracy that are guided by ‘the political’ (Mouffe 2005). Radical theories of social change and democracy emphasise that, rather than being left ‘empty’, approaches to theorising social
change such as justice and democracy *should* have a value of what is good (Honneth 2003) and resist the division of the cultural, economic and political dimensions of capitalism (Fraser and Honneth 2003). As Freire (1970:48, emphasis in original) argued, theories of “authentic” social change would be based on “pedagogical action…with the oppressed”. Progressive social transformation requires a clear commitment to the educational dialectic of critique and hope (Allman 1999).

Establishing negativity, dissonance and rage as the grounding for his perspective, Holloway (2002:2) argues the search for a ‘true world’ must be created with a normative judgement of what that world could look like. Despite acknowledging there is no need for a “promise of a happy ending”, he is clear “it would be a world of justice”. This normative approach to understanding social change establishes enquiries into “how the world is, how the world ought to be, and how we can change the conditions of the world” (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015:269 emphasis in original). Through this normative imagination and the “rejection of a world we feel to be negative” (Holloway 2002:2) social change becomes an emancipatory struggle. A progressive imagination demands a critical interrogation of democracy, revolution and, importantly, the notion of power to which I turn in the next section.

### 2.1.2 Power: a theory of relations

In the previous section, I demonstrated the importance of a normative imagination in theories of social change. As Allman (1999:100) argues, for social transformation, “there is some knowledge that is the objective to know”. In this section, I introduce theories of power, demonstrating the invisibility of power and its relation to how certain understandings of the world are established as ‘truth’.

Although there are many different understandings of power, and no agreed definition, it is an integral conceptual tool for theorising progressive social change. In its broadest sense, power concerns relations. Lukes (1974) highlighted three faces of power: first, the classical-pluralist approach that depicts power as a competition; second, power is being able to determine the agenda; third, power operates covertly, and is manipulating and controlling. In this section, I highlight the covert and invisible nature of power that
emerges in discourse and the vision of what counts as ‘official’ and “legitimate knowledge” (Apple 1993:46).

The central distinction within theories of power is between those that emphasise possession by competing groups (Dahl 1957) and those that understand power through the exposition of a multitude of complex relations. Although Dahl noted the possible disparity between this conceptualisation of power and its reality in practice, theories of power that emphasise possession tend towards the notion of power over: power becomes a “zero-sum game” (Foucault 1985:786) where one person gains power and another subsequently loses (Rowlands 1995; Chambers 2006; Gaventa 2006). The classical-pluralist approach is underpinned by liberalism and the notion that all groups are able to compete equally. It is particularly evident within liberal democracy where power between competing groups is decided through elections and one exerts power over the other, albeit as a ‘representative’.

Countering the liberal tradition, critical approaches explain power through relations. Following Foucault (1982), various conceptualisations of power have been explained as existing in relations of to, with, within, over and for (see Rowlands 1995, 1997; Eyben 2005; Gaventa and Cornwall 2006). They show that power can be negative and positive, and that it exists in relations and the position rather than the person or group (Gaventa and Cornwall 2006). For example, power over is a negative, controlling, dominant form of power from the ‘top’, while power to, for and within represent the forms of power associated with capacity and agency from the ‘bottom-up’ (Chambers 2006). The shifting boundaries of power are contextually sensitive, and in one context a person or organisation may be perceived as having ‘power to’ but in another has or uses ‘power over’, to refer to the well established dualism (Karlberg 2005).

Power has been used to explain how people gain or lose power, share or create power, or use power with negative and positive effects (see Gaventa 2006), and to show that people can have power over people, power over matter, and power in the political and social sense where it involves other people (Bachrach and Baratz 1970). Power, therefore, is an important conceptual tool to consider “the relationships that shape how a person or organisation acquires more power to, power with, power within and power over” (Eyben 2005:23 emphasis in original). It is also important to recognise that people can gain a
sense of power, and “if, as Foucault argues, power is expressed in interactions, empowerment, as well, happens in interactions” (Worthen, Veale, Mckay and Wessells 2010:51). The many conceptualisations of empowerment (see Ibrahim and Alkire 2007) demonstrate the significance of understanding how people gain a sense of their power to respond to power over, though it is important to remember that this cannot be understood as the other having lost any power (Rowlands 1995).

Establishing that power exists in relations rather than individuals is crucial to understanding that power is not always visible. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) conceptualised two faces of power: one is visibly controlling, the other is restrictive in that it maintains a particular social relation. The restrictive face is a coercive form of ‘power over’ that places boundaries on ideas and thoughts through “propaganda, management and manipulation - arms of domination” (Freire 1970:50). The distinction between the actual exercise of power and the restrictive face of power show that power can be invisible; it can be in what is not done and cannot be measured. This ‘restrictive face’ creates discourses that shape what is understood to be ‘true’ (Foucault 1980).

Gramsci (1971) established the term hegemony within theories of social change, specifically in relation to power, government and states. Because hegemony is conceptualised through relationships, social change can be produced through struggle, but can also be shaped by dominant – hegemonic – relations and discourses. Shapiro (2003:4) argues that, “domination can result from a person’s, or a group’s, shaping agendas, constraining options, and, in the limiting case, influencing people’s preferences and desires”. Exposing the invisibility of power, particularly through the relationship of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’, is a critical element of progressive social change because “the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires” (Freire 1970:29). The immersion reproduces a specific version of history and truth; it becomes ‘official knowledge’ that is reinforced and perpetuated within structures of neoliberalism, neoconservatism such as education and schools (Apple 1993).

This section has reflected on the notion of power. Relational interpretations expose the invisible nature of power that materialises in the establishment of certain ‘truths’ and
discourses that can, subsequently, shape the way people live and the way people think they can hope to live. In the next section, I examine revolution, a term often invoked to refer to periods of change where the power is seemingly transferred between different actors.

2.1.3 Revolutionary social change

Revolutions are often characterised by a particular moment or period of uprisings, as is evident in Egypt with the 1952 Revolution and the 25 January Revolution in 2011. Despite the depiction of revolutions as events, there are two notable dimensions within theoretical analyses: first, at the classical end, scholars seek to explain why and how revolutions happen in a particular moment and its connection to democracy and democratisation; second, critical approaches tend towards theorising revolutions as longer-term processes and possibilities that can take multiple forms.

Within the classical tradition, Huntington’s (1962) four-pronged classification outlined four processes through which revolutions occur: internal war, revolutionary coup, reform coup, and palace revolution. While Huntington’s approach to revolution and democracy has been applied in analyses of contemporary struggles like Egypt (see Achcar 2013), the characteristics Huntington attributed to revolutionary change through an ‘internal war’ are more widely recognised by the term ‘mass revolution’ whereby high levels of participation and violence result in “fundamental changes to the political authority and social system” (Tanter and Midlarsky 1967:265). This classical tradition predominantly explains what happens to the state.

With more emphasis on the people who create revolutionary change, critical approaches to revolution establish its continuing nature, and raise questions of the direction of social change. A revolution is a long process (Tanter and Midlarsky 1967) and has been argued to involve such complex human transformation that we are actually unable to comprehend that it is a process we are already experiencing (Williams 1961). Rosa Luxemburg ignited a key debate: whether revolutionary social change is an issue of ‘reform or revolution’? Luxemburg critiqued the notion that capitalism was adapting and would eventually produce a socialist system through its evolution. She argued that social democracy should support reforms and the people who struggled, establishing that the
struggle for reform is “its means, the social revolution its goal” (see Hudis and Anderson 2004:129).

Foucault (1994:123) argued, there are “as many kinds [of revolution] as there are possible subversive recodifications of power relations…one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions that leave essentially untouched the power relations”. Once again, Foucault demonstrates the need for continued re-examination of the processes and directions of social change and for analyses of contemporary cases, such as the 25 January revolution in Egypt. When revolution is conceptualised as the pursuit of freedom (Freire 1970), the focus shifts away from bringing about change through the state to change created by the people, ‘the insurgents’ (Arendt 1963). Similarly, when understood not as the taking of power but the dissolving of power relations (Holloway 2002), revolution becomes the process through which the oppressed are liberated (Freire 1970).

Once it is understood that revolutions cannot be planned, and that we cannot wait for them, there needs to be a continued engagement with other ways in which to create social and political reform (Bayat 2010). Like Foucault, Holloway (2002) argues against privileging the state as the site of power, theoretically and in the practical pursuit of social change. Criticising the dominance of state-focused approaches to social change that reduce change to ‘reform or revolution’, he argued that contemporary revolution should seek to ‘change the world without taking power’ and that it is “how we learn - the structure of our thought that disarms us” (Holloway 2002:3). Here, theoretical enquiry of revolution and processes of change becomes a pedagogical and educative process for considering what kind of world might be possible, particularly in a moment when globalisation has generated increased scepticism about the ‘truths’ (Davies 2014).

2.1.4 Administering change through liberal ‘democracy’

So far in this chapter, I have examined power and revolution as broad concepts in theories of social change. In this section, I focus on democracy to examine the institutions - the rules and structures - that help to shape and influence the direction and shape of social change. Democracy is most widely understood in representative terms: “a mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control…where all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal
rights to take part in such decision-making directly” (Beetham 1992:40). Beetham’s
definition encompasses the essence of democracy: it is a framework for organising the
relationship between the people - the demos - and the state. Within liberalism, however,
democracy has been established as the best way through which to manage power and
“minimise domination” (Shapiro 2003:3).

Liberal democracy materialises most evidently through the aggregative and
representative tradition that “has bequeathed a view of democracy in which competing
for the majority’s vote is the essence of the exercise” (Shapiro 2003:3). In line with
Rousseau’s (1762) Social Contract theory, aggregative democracy essentially enacts the
‘general will’ of the largest group within the demos (the people), operationalising it
through elections, structures and institutions. However, Rousseau (1792) also noted the
tension between conceptual and material realities of democracy, a concern that endures in
more recent discussions as Beetham (1992:40) illustrates: in its sense, democracy is at
one end of the “spectrum” and is the antithesis to “authoritarian or dictatorial rule”;
whereas theories of democracy have become, in actuality, material questions of
distribution (“how much democracy?”) and the institutions required for it to be
implemented within liberalism. Within the liberalised ‘end point’ (Grugel and Bishop
2014) paradigm of democratic theory where states must transition through
democratisation, notions of the nation, state and citizen are reified, and democracy is
reduced to institutions (see Fraser 2005; Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor 2003). Contestation
around important concepts within democracy (for example, ‘citizen’, ‘binding rules’, ‘the
people’ and ‘equal rights’) has contributed to critiques of how democracy materialises in
‘today’s world’ (Shapiro 2003:1). As Dunn (1979:2) argued, “democratic reality is pretty
thin on the ground”.

Acknowledging that the liberal tradition of democratic theory and practice prioritises
elites, leadership and state actors while marginalising other non-state actors (such as
social movements and activists) (della Porta 2014) provokes questions of power and the
groups managed to reshape the “common sense understanding” of ‘democracy’ and
‘freedom’ “so that the ‘thin democracy’ of markets replaced more participatory ‘thick
democratic’ models”: the liberal approach had ‘won’. There was no better way to ensure
development and social change.
Within analyses of democratic transitions, some transitologists, although still stressing institutions, also drew attention to the notion of democratic values and ideas: it was argued that ‘democratisation’ requires “not only free and fair elections but also the creation of democratic institutions and an accompanying democratic political culture” (Grand 2014: 22). However, the enduring emphasis on elections and the functionality of institutions (the ‘thin’, representative approach to democracy) is in danger of leaving the call for a ‘democratic political culture’ empty. Challenging the dominant approaches, critical revolutionary theory introduces alternatives whereby the people are the focus of social change: the next section presents an agency-oriented approach to social change as a process that is created and shaped by people.

2.2 Moving beyond the state: participating in and creating social change

In the previous section, I reflected on liberalised conceptualisations of social change that focus on the state and simultaneously suppress a critical and progressive perspective of the way the world could or should be. Theoretically, two dominant strands to democratic theory are evident, each, to some extent, emphasising a different element of the Greek term, demos (the people) and kratos (rule or authority). In the previous section, I focused on the most dominant approach, the theories that emphasise kratos: the processes, institutions and procedures such as elections that shape government’s jurisdiction to rule and can be empirically observed (see Diamond 2008). In this section I turn to the other key dimension of democracy - the demos – to examine how ‘the people’ participate.

Liberal democracy and structural accounts of revolution attempt to conceal the role of people as agents of change. This section examines the contribution of people to social change from two angles: first, by outlining alternatives to the liberal approach to democracy; second, by exploring how people create change through social movements and social activism. It also responds to John Dunn’s (1976:26, cited in Shapiro 2003:2) assessment of the two approaches to democratic theory: he concluded “one dismally ideological and the other fairly blatantly utopian”. I do this by introducing radical democratic alternatives by those who have critiqued depoliticisation and the ‘post-political’ turn to deliberation and consensus. Along with a discussion of social
movements, this section demonstrates that, in the contemporary context, there are multiple possibilities for new forms and spaces of mobilisation (Byrd 2005), for a range of actors and organisations (Grugel and Bishop 2014) and for the increased contribution of people to affect social change (Perrons 2004).

2.2.1 Engaging ‘with’ the state: participation and deliberation

Critique and rejection of ‘thin’ democracy contributed to widespread recognition of the many spaces in which people participate in processes of social change (see Gandin and Apple 2002; Baiocchi 2003; Cornwall 2004; Cornwall and Goetz 2005; Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Pateman 2012). In this section, I build on these critiques to examine ‘alternative’ approaches to democracy: participation and deliberation.

 Alternatives are necessary because, although representative democracy should ensure that the concerns of all people within the demos are represented, albeit indirectly, it is ultimately exclusionary (Fraser 2005). For instance, the inability of representative democracy to represent women effectively arguably led to efforts to increase women’s political participation - a process of “democratizing democracy” (Cornwall and Goetz 2005:783, emphasis in original). However, critical questions remain: what kind of institutions or culture would be regarded as ‘democratic’, and how do ‘democratic’ institutions and cultures develop?

Habermas (1994:6), a key proponent of the deliberative model, demonstrates the reliance on rationality whereby deliberative politics “depends on a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation”. Political questions can be answered through rational discussion and deliberation, generating a ‘public sphere’ and collective will (ibid.). Because of the emphasis on rationality and reason, and because, to some extent, they still draw on Rousseau’s notion of The Social Contract, deliberative models follow liberal approaches that reduce democracy to competition for votes in order to achieve an “aggregation of individual preferences” (Grugel and Bishop 2014:23). Indeed, Shaipro (2003) argues deliberative democracy seeks to construct the general will rather than enact the one that emerges through the ‘democratic’ process.
Deliberative democracy emphasises rational discussion that relies on information and expertise. “The central claim of deliberative democratic theorists [is] that individuals should always be prepared to defend their moral and political arguments and claims with reasons, and be prepared to deliberate with others about the reasons they provide” (Pateman 2012:8). Therefore, because discussion and debate are not synonymous with democracy itself, participatory forms of democracy that develop skills and capacities are, in reality, more democratic than deliberation (ibid.). The participatory democracy process in Porto Alegre, Brazil, demonstrates that people develop democratic skills and capacities by engaging with democratic structures (Pateman 2012). Highlighting the links between democracy and education, in their analysis of the Porto Alegre Citizen School, Gandin and Apple (2002:105) argue participatory and deliberative democratic processes were emancipatory and transformative for the people involved: by “inverting previous priorities and instead serving the historically oppressed and excluded groups, structured forms of education” enabled the construction of a new “epistemological understanding about what counts as knowledge”. Similar to the Citizen School, Bolivia’s Popular Participation Reform enabled community members to learn to create new rules, transform social preferences and secure new resources through collective memories, networks, building of resources and the ‘cumulative effect’ of political learning (Whitehead and Gray-Molina 1999, 2003). In Argentina, people involved in participatory budgeting developed a range of ‘democratic’ skills, practices and attitudes (Lerner and Schugurensky 2005).

Reiterating the importance of power within theories of social change, ‘thick’ approaches reveal the pedagogical imperative for theories of social change. Participatory and deliberative forms of democracy can create political subjectivities, and people feel more entitled and able to participate in processes of democratic change (Cornwall and Coelho 2007:21). Within ‘invited’ and ‘popular’ spaces, participatory democracy has been presented as offering the potential for a ‘deeper’ form of democracy (Cornwall 2004). However, participatory democracy is not without its challenges or critics: for example, even as citizens seek to find new ways to create social change through participating in democracy at the local level, the state has been shown to control the ways citizens participate within invited spaces (Ruiz 2004). Therefore, democratic alternatives must support processes that enable learning like those exposed by Apple and Gandin (2002) where ‘official knowledge’ (Apple 1993) or and established ‘truth’ comes from, and how
and why it is constructed in ways that oppress and exclude. This requires recognising that power relations and the focus on institutions and processes remain unchanged, even within participatory approaches to democracy.

Critiques of participatory practices within development go beyond the scope of this thesis but raise questions of power and empowerment, including the extent to which participation transforms or changes power relations (see Kothari 2001; Mohan 2001; Mosse 2001). While participatory and deliberative forms of democracy might not achieve what had been hoped or expected, it is evident that people change through their participation: there is a pedagogical dynamic. Within reflections on participatory democracy, there have been calls for reinterpretations that can politicise participation through radical politics (Hickey and Mohan 2005). Arguing that development had been depoliticised through participation, this highlights that, as new challenges emerge, so the project of rethinking the concept of democracy within changing contemporary contexts must continue.

In recent times, democratic theory has been revitalised in response to global challenges (see Wainwright 2003) and by radical contributions that argue there must be alternatives in which the world is changed through ways other than taking or reforming state power (Holloway 2002). The next section looks at the contribution of radical democracy as a progressive alternative for thinking about democracy. This theoretical debate critiques deliberative and participatory approaches that, through depicting democracy as the refinement of technical processes and institutions, detracts from class conflict (Dean 2014) and has led to depoliticisation (Rancière 1999).

2.2.2 Towards radical ‘democratic’ alternatives

The previous section established participatory and deliberative democracy as approaches through which people can engage in social change and simultaneously develop political skills and capacities, demonstrating the indivisibility of education and democracy (Dewey 1916). However, when conceptualising a progressive approach to social change, being able to engage and participate does not take the analysis far enough: progressive ideas of social change must seek to transform relations, not just navigate them by “extending it, enforcing it, tweaking the procedures, refining the process” (Dean
2014:261). While participation and deliberation provide opportunities for people to learn as they create an alternative relationship with the state, this section explores how an “interruptive...‘in your face democracy’ where the “disposition to challenge” (Davies 2008:14) can create ideas of different democratic possibilities.

The necessity of difference and disagreement in a ‘truly democratic society’ is central to radical approaches to democracy. Mouffe (2005:3) argues the attempt to reduce democracy to “universal rational consensus” by implementing “institutions which, through supposedly ‘impartial’ procedures would reconcile all conflicting interests and values” strips democracy from the necessary ‘we/they’ antagonisms necessary for social transformation. In Rancière’s (1999:102) terms, consensus – through participation and deliberation - has resulted in “the disappearance of politics”. Similarly, according to Žižek (1999:353), this disappearance centres on the “de-politicisation of economics” and the problem of post-politics as residing in the Left’s acceptance of capitalism and willingness to “surrender” to neoliberalism.

Although with different justifications and emphasis, critics of the post-political and ‘postdemocracy’ turn such as Mouffe (2005), Rancière (1999) and Žižek (1999), demonstrate the centrality of agonistic opposition between “legitimate enemies” (Mouffe 2005:52):

The term [postdemocracy]... denote[s] the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasizes the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action. Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests (Rancière 1999:101-102).

As the antithesis to consensus, the agonistic and conflictual nature of the political through ‘dispute’ (Rancière 1999) is necessary to expose the “exclusive, oligarchic, and consensual governance of an alliance of professional economic, political and technocratic elites determined to defend the neoliberal order by any means necessary” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:3). In this sense, democracy is reclaimed as a passionate form of
politics that rejects the liberal depiction of the state as neutral (Mouffe 2005). Crowther, Martin and Shaw (2008:13) demonstrate that, “learning for a truly democracy society can only be achieved and sustained through the common commitment of citizens to learn, argue, debate and, if necessary, to differ and disagree”. However, as they go on to argue, “this is about building a deliberative democratic culture” (ibid.) they illustrate dominance of deliberation within alternatives to representative democracy. Building on their recognition that people can learn through difference and disagreement, a radical approach would emphasise contestation within a democratic culture: “democracy equals conflict” (Davies 2011:1, emphasis in original).

The “democracy movements” that emerged in 2011 highlighted dissatisfaction with representative democracy but also fell prey to the “politics of no-politics” (Dean 2014:268). Adopting consensual and participatory models, to some extent, impeded the Occupy movement’s ability to locate their argument in a critique of capitalism: “avoiding the division and antagonism that comes with taking a political position, they displaced their energies onto procedural concerns with inclusion and participation…which makes the outcome of political struggle less significant than the process of deliberation” (Dean 2014:269). I want to make two points in relation to Dean’s assessment: first, within consensus, the normative imagination of the struggle can be lost; second, noting Occupy activists were less focused on deliberation than inclusion, Dean demonstrates the pedagogical potential of movements to be spaces through which people can engage in critical deliberative political processes where “dissenting voices are valued rather than suppressed” (Crowther, Martin and Shaw 2008:19).

Radical critiques of liberal and representative democracy outlined in this section highlight the need to respond to depoliticisation and the reduction of politics and democracy to institutions and procedures, including within participatory and deliberative democracy. The radical approach reinvigorates theories of democracy with notions of opposition and confrontation, dissent and disagreement, features of the contemporary period of protest and conflict that cannot be ignored. Rather than navigating division, radical alternatives offer potential to think about how division and confrontation can be educationally productive dimensions of democracy. The enlivening of democratic theory through analysis of the many spaces and processes through which people participate in and create democracy alongside the characteristics of ‘the political’ (Mouffe 2005) builds
on Davies (2008:19) who argues that “a much more assertive democracy is required”. As this chapter continues, I examine social movements as an alternative way in which people assert themselves in other democratic possibilities and visions of social change.

### 2.2.3 Creating change through social movements

The previous section focused on theories of democracy. I reflected on participatory and deliberative democracy, and established that, to understand a period of protest and conflict, radical approaches could allow us to view difference and contestation as a process of creating progressive social change. As spaces through which people engage in creating social change through alternative forms of participation, this section looks more specifically at how social movements have been theorised and analysed.

Illustrating the importance of “collective, organised, sustained, and non-institutional challenge to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs or practices” (Goodwin and Jasper 2003:3), analysing how and why individuals engage in group action to create change has generated a wealth of theories of ‘new’, ‘spontaneous’, ‘transnational’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘autonomous’, ‘subaltern’ (among many other terms) social movements. The various applications demonstrate the contention around defining a social movement and the lack of a single established definition (see Crossley 2002). As the contemporary context opens up new spaces and practices of social action (see Byrd 2005; Castells 2012) an expansive conception of social movements is necessary to allow for, and respond to, the innovation and creativity with which people seek to create social change.

Still the most influential theoretical approach to understanding social movements, ‘contentious politics’ (see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 1996, 2001) emphasises “the continuities between movement and institutionalised actions, the rationality of movement actors, the strategic problems confronted by movements, and the role of movements as agencies for social change” (Jenkins 1983:528). It emerged through a rejection of Blumer’s (1969) behaviourist conception of the ‘expressive crowd’, and has largely been dominated by North American scholars analysing movements within those contexts (della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Particularly advanced by resource mobilisation theory and the political process model (see McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1997), these analyses argued movement actors would make judgements and calculations, and that movements
were mobilised by goals, opportunities and constraints, and a rational calculation of means for mobilisation (Crossley 2002). Analyses of social movements, within this perspective, are concerned with the collective and organisational level, and the structures from, within and against which the movement, as an entity, mobilises.

The dominance of social movement theory that focused on why a movement took a particular form and used a particular strategy (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) missed rich and important activity that took shape beyond the state (Snow 2004). By treating the movement “just as an empirical phenomenon”, social movement theories were failing to explain its “deep mind” - why a movement emerged and where it might go in the future (Melucci 1985:793). Furthering these criticisms of rational, organisational level theories, European scholars such as Habermas (1981), Touraine (1980) and Melucci (1985) theorised ‘New Social movements’ through cognitive and identity-based analyses. Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, in particular, invigorated the ways in which movements were understood by shifting analyses to the ‘cultural ground’ (Melucci 1985), and by demonstrating that movement actors participated in struggles that involved cross-cutting issues of multiple identities which went beyond simple grievances against the state, market and subsequent unequal capital-labour relations. Importantly, New Social Movement theorists showed social movements “are not one organisation or one particular special interest group. It is more like a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different organisations” (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:55). From this perspective, cognitive approaches revived the notion of creativity that was evident in Blumer’s account of spontaneous collective behaviour (ibid).

New Social Movement theories, “expanded the focus from movement organisations and conventional politics, pointing to broader definitions of movements based on loosely organised networks, collective identities, and cultural challenges” (Haenfler, Johnson and Jones 2012:4). Along with Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) detour from defining a social movement by its structure, an important conceptual terrain for understanding the role of people in creating social change was opened up. The issues, practices and networks in which people engaged in and created social change broadened. For example, analyses of anti-corporatist ideas that connected people across the world (see Edwards 2004; Castells 2012) and the growing phenomenon of ‘lifestyle movements’ (Haenfler, Johnson and
Jones 2012) showed that social movement theory could no longer be focused on “political action and protest events” (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005:38). With the recognition of the contemporary reality of how people participated in creating social change, the term ‘social movement’ came to represent ideas and networks of people who shared solidarities (see Castells 2012) where people engaged in various practices and strategies of ‘social action’ (Foley 1999).

Cognitive perspectives recognised movements as collective spaces and experiences through which individuals were transformed and could, subsequently, create social transformation (Finger 1989). Combined with the “culturalist” perspectives that connect movement participation to the creation of new identities and consciousness (Flacks, 2004: 137), this broader perspective enables a deeper understanding of how social movements contribute to the creation of knowledge and social change. Rational approaches take the cognitive dimension of social movements for granted and fail to expose how a movement thinks – its ‘cognitive praxis’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). In contrast, an approach that examines knowledge and ideas can challenge social movement theories that represent movements as of a particular moment and space, and defined by their actions. Focusing on the ideas of the movement would enable reflection on how movement actors create and challenge ‘knowledge’ in the collective context through multiple forms and spaces of social action.

Another cognitive and cultural approach to social movement theory concerns the important emotional dimension of movement participation. Although not implying activists were irrational by countering rational theories, the specific study of emotion in the context of a social movement has shown that, among many other complex emotions that are so often easily conflated (Jasper 2011), strong reactions to events can cause ‘moral shock’ that forms a dual-edged ‘emotional battery’ that has both positive and negative energies (Jasper 2007). For example, people respond to the shock of the world not living up to their hope or expectation in different ways: some will seek an agent to blame, while others seek the infrastructure to take action, for example a movement or community organisation (Jasper 2012). Investigating and understanding the ways in which activists experience, and are motivated and shaped by, the emotional dimension of social action is important because the emotive and cognitive are intertwined. As della Porta (2014:57) notes of Tahrir Square, the focal point of the Egyptian revolution,
“emotional reactions were accompanied by cognitive processes, as ‘Tahrir was not all fun and festivity’”. One outcome is that people in the square were politicised through interactions and experiences of “serious politics” and “intense emotions” (ibid.).

The perennial structure-agency debate manifests in the study of social movements by continuing to emphasise structure (Jasper 2004) and has resulted in notable gaps in the understanding of how social movements impact the people who participate. Despite acknowledging that “the outcomes of social movement activities, whether short-term or long-term, refer to a modification of the political, cultural, and biographical domain” (Bosi and Uba 2009:409) and many calls from within the field to conduct wider investigations that also recognise unintended implications (Giugni 2008), the majority of enquiries into the outcomes of social movements concern their influence in political debate and policy making (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello and Su 2010; see volume Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1999). Studies have examined the effect of movement participation on various cultural, political and biographical (McAdam 1989) factors, such as: religious affiliation, marriage and family (Sherkat and Blocker, 1997); civic-engagement, life-satisfaction and trust (Howard and Gilbert, 2008); self-awareness, commitment and individualisation (Kovan and Dirkx, 2003); and, socialisation and psychological well-being (Fillieule, 2012). However, gaps remain in the understanding the impact and outcomes of movement participation (Giugni 2008; Bosi and Uba 2009).

In response to the gap in the understanding of the outcomes of social movements, affective, cognitive and cultural approaches to theorising social movements generate insights into the different ways and spaces in which people participate in creating social change and the implications of participating on the movement and the individual. The remainder of this chapter examines different approaches to understanding the implications of social movements on the people who participate. Building on cognitive approaches that demonstrate the importance of understanding the ideas and thoughts within social movements, the next section examines learning in social movements.

2.3 Learning in social action
So far in this chapter, I have reflected on conceptualisations of social change that focus on state structures and argued for a normative imagination of social change that can help to understand a period of conflict and protest. Through critical approaches to democracy and revolution, I established the significance of social movements and social activism as alternatives to the state through which to create, and engage in, forms of democracy, politics and processes of social change, and “movements as producers of knowledge, not as rational operators in a world of competing movement industries” (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:55). This section examines how activists are impacted through their engagement and participation, reflecting further on the intersections of power and knowledge throughout.

Although ‘contentious politics’ theorist, Doug McAdam (1989:758), examined the biographical effects of activism, demonstrating that activists were “attitudinally more disposed and structurally more available for subsequent activism”, there has been inadequate attention paid to the impact on the perspectives and future trajectories of those who participate. Those that have embarked on such enquiries established social movements and social action to be important pedagogical spaces of learning and knowledge production (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Welton 1993; Foley 1999; Schugurensky and Myers 2003; Hall and Turay 2006) that can be transformational for society (Finger 1989) and the individuals who participate (Freire 1970, 1972; Allman 1999). Although adult educators were slow to recognise the significance of social movements on theories of adult education and the creation of new knowledge (Holford 1995; Harley 2012), the growing interest in learning within social movements (Harley 2012) is borne from the recognition that learning in struggle is central to personal and societal transformation (Freire 1970; 1972; Finger 1989; Welton 1993). In this section, I examine studies of learning in social movements and social action to explore education and different processes, spaces and ways of understanding learning in struggles for social change.

2.3.1 The hegemony of education as ‘schooling’
Dewey (1916) expounded the significant relationship between education and democracy, criticising the segregation of politics and education within theories of social change: “the problem of education in its relation to direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications; economic, domestic, international, religious, cultural, economic, and political” (Dewey 1937:473, emphasis in original). Advancing Rousseau’s (1792) position that better education creates a better society, Dewey (1916) concluded that theories of education should adapt to the changes in ideas and practices within society. Just as I have argued that mainstream and dominant democratic theories are inadequate for the contemporary period and therefore require new enquiries and new directions, so, Dewey demonstrates, theories and practices of education should be part of those democratic imaginations. To create a better society, therefore, there must be better education, and for better education, there must be a reconceptualisation of what education means in the contemporary world: the starting point is to recognise that education, ‘schooling’, is never neutral (Apple 2003).

It is within the tradition of Dewey’s philosophy of education that critical theorists argued schooling “serves the interest of the state” (Giroux 2001:241), educates people to be ‘producers’ (Carr and Hartnett 1996) and subsequently ensures the oppression of the poor and marginalised (Freire 1970). Based on the model of teacher-student and knowledge provider-passive recipient, education is the “exercise of domination…with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (Freire 1970:59). Gramsci (1971:350) argued that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship”, exposing how schools are not simply places for learning and enquiry; they are political establishments that reflect and circulate particular norms, values and ideologies that exist within a given social and national context (Harber 1991). Through their use of “propaganda, slogans - deposits” (Freire 1970:60) schools and educators are responsible for an unthinking and unquestioning population that continue to dominate ideas of society and the world (Carr and Hartnett 1996). The hegemony of neoliberal and neoconservative education policies that apply a “market logic” (Gandin and Apple 2002:103) to education disregard the contribution of popular and alternative forms of knowledge. Such an approach to education is evident in Egypt where school “students are taught to follow an authoritarian structure through educational procedures” and universities restrict diversity of opinion
and limit opportunities to participate in or understand the democratic experience (Cochran 2008:218).

Reasserting the political into theories of education, critical pedagogues challenged formal education systems to ‘empower the powerless’ through education that creates conditions for social transformation by enabling students to be “political subjects” who are “politically and ethically motivated to struggle in the interest of greater human freedom and emancipation” (McLaren 2002:38). In this tradition, education could become a tool through which all unequal relations are challenged, leading to transformation of the self and of society (Allman 1999). Despite such interventions, education practice remains dominated by the hegemony of liberalism: school students are ‘indoctrinated’ (Dewey 1937) while, in the contemporary context, university education has been subjected to the increased marketisation (see Crowther, Galloway and Martin 2005; Cowden and Singh 2013).

By recognising the hegemony of neoliberalism within conceptualisations of, and avenues for, social change, including democracy and education, it becomes necessary to seek another way to understand the educational potential of processes of social change. Such alternatives to liberalised, ‘banking’ approaches to education that see the teacher as the dispenser of knowledge into the unsuspecting and uncritical student (Freire 1970) become visible when viewed in light of Gramsci’s (1971) and Freire’s (1970; 1972) interpretations of Marx’s theory of consciousness (see Allman 1999). I focus on critical consciousness and its potential for action in the next section.

2.3.2 Critical consciousness and taking action

The previous section reflected on the hegemony of schooling to establish that a progressive conceptualisation of social change that is “dedicated to empowerment and social transformation” (McLaren 2002:32) requires continued enquiry into learning and power. In this section, I develop the connection between education, learning and social action through the notion of critical consciousness.

With its origins in the ideas of the Frankfurt School and works of Gramsci and Freire (Lather 1998), the critical pedagogy project towards progressive social change is heavily
informed by Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and a belief in the importance of education and organisation of the masses “to galvanise them to action” (Gramsci 1994: xvi). Allman (1999:29) argues that, despite saying little specifically about education, Marx’s concern with consciousness shows that he must have perceived the struggle for social transformation “to be educational.” Echoing Marx, Gramsci (1994) and Freire (1972:54) converge, arguing that critical consciousness and imagination are foundational for being able to perceive change.

Critical consciousness is the process through which a person can become conscious of how they are conditioned to think in a certain way (Freire 1970, 1972) where they recognise the source of power and how it is constructed through the control of ideas and knowledge (Foucault 1982). Establishing that critical consciousness is developed through interactions with others, Gramsci (1971) demonstrates that criticism and discussion are essential to learning within the collective. For example, consciousness-raising activities, particularly noted within the feminist movement in the 1960s, encouraged women to share their experiences and problems, and subsequently identify the cause of their oppression (Massin 1992). To understand how social movements shapes people’s perspectives requires reflecting on how they develop understandings of power, and how this translates into action, or to use the Freirean term, conscientisation. This requires examining how consciousness develops in social situations (Chovanec and Lange 2007),

As with conscientisation, Freire’s (1970) conceptualisations of dialogue and praxis emphasise the indivisibility of critical thought and action. Dialogue is “an act of creation,…not where some name [the world] on behalf of others” because they believe themselves to be the “owners” of truth or knowledge (Freire 1970:70-71). In dialogue, power relations are transformed through the mutual commitment to action that transforms the world. Importantly, it is not enough to discuss or debate: dialogue, in the Freirean perspective, is praxis where critical reflection and the commitment to action that transforms the world are indivisible. In this way, dialogue and praxis are distinct from activism, which Freire (1970:69) refers to as “action for action’s sake”. Dialogue and praxis involve critical engagement with the theory and practice of human activity, and “requires theory to illuminate it” (Freire 1970:106), whereas activism lacks the informed perspective of the kind of ideas that are necessary for social transformation. This is an important distinction because it suggests that not all social action reflects the values
necessary for progressive social change. It cannot be assumed that all ‘activists’ critically engage with the theory and practice in ways that lead to critical consciousness; therefore, as this thesis continues, I use the terms activists and activism to avoid the assumption that social movement action involves critical consciousness: in this sense, I use activism as “the antithesis of passivity” (Bayat 2002:3).

Critical approaches to education must be, according to Freire (1970), part of a problem posing education rather than a ‘banking’ approach where knowledge is ‘bestowed’ as gifts to students who receive and store it without enquiry. Emancipatory education and learning requires the understanding that human beings are learners within a context (Freire 1970) and that people learn through their lived experiences and are conditioned by their reality. Therefore, in order to understand what and how people learn, learning should be examined within a context (Foley 1999), taking into account how knowledge is situated within a particular ‘reality’. In the remainder of the chapter, I explore how contexts generate learning that can be structured and intentional, as with ‘schooling’, or it can be informal and experiential. Before these distinctions can be made, I first differentiate between learning and education.

2.3.3 Learning or education?

Before examining learning in specific contexts, it is important to establish definitional boundaries and acknowledge that, outside the “fragmenting, diversifying and expanding” (Foley 2004:4) field of adult education, the distinction between education and learning is often overlooked (Field 2005). There is widespread agreement that “the concept of learning is difficult to define, isolate, measure, and apply empirically” (Levy 1994: 280). This conceptual difficulty is exemplified through three terms used to explain how people develop political views, knowledge, behaviours or ideologies: ‘political education’, ‘political learning’ and ‘political socialisation’. For instance, political education highlights formal processes and intentional interventions that lead to the transferring of political ideas (see Harber 1991; Davies 1994). Political learning is most widely used to refer to the, sometimes informal and incidental, acquisition of political knowledge and information, and the changing of political capabilities (see Levy 1994; Stein 1994; Weeks 2002; Whitehead and Gray-Molina 1999, 2003; Williams 2004a; Hickey and Mohan 2005; Çağdar, G. 2006; Karakastanis 2008). Finally, political socialisation
explores how people come to a position of being engaged within political processes (see Pfaff 2009; Beaumont 2011).

Endresen and Von Kotze (2005:432) define education as “deliberate, planned interventions” and “learning as the acquisition of skills, understanding and knowledge that happens as part of processes of social action and is directed towards radical social change”. Learning takes many forms and happens in many spaces, as reflected by the many terms used to explore learning in contexts beyond schools and ‘schooling’. Approaches include: lifelong and lifewide learning (Schugurensky and Myers 2003), situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991), community development (Kane 2010), popular or radical education (Foley 1999; Giroux 1991, 2001; Crowther, Galloway and Martin 2005; Jesson and Newman 2004; Kane 2001, 2010). Even within the most common typology that was established in the 1960s (Field 2005) - non-formal, informal and formal education (Coombs and Ahmed 1974, cites in La Belle 1982) - many other terms are used (Marsick and Watkins 2001) and continue to evolve (for a discussion, see Schugurensky 2000b). For example, there was an attempt to emphasise Freirean concepts through ‘emancipatory learning’ and ‘social purpose education’ (Ollis 2008). While the specific terms may be wide-ranging, theories converge on the importance of critical thinking and reflection for people to be conscious of, and therefore able to act to change, their social reality.

People become conscious of their social reality through different forms and processes of informal learning that can be self-directed, incidental and tacit/socialisation (Livingstone 2000; Schugurensky 2000a). Because not all learning is intentional or conscious (Schugurensky 2000a), critical consciousness cannot be assumed to always develop, even through deliberate practices like those seen within popular education (see Kane 2001). Instead, people also learn in the ‘lifelong and lifewide’ social processes that occur in a range of ‘pedagogical spaces’ (Schugurensky and Myers 2003), for example, through interactions within peer groups, workplaces (Livingstone 2000) and activist groups (Hall and Turary 2006). The lived experiences and interactions can present ‘educative’ moments because they place the learner in a context that is challenging and therefore ‘productive’ (Davies 2014).
The reflective account of learning outlined by anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) highlights the complex nature of learning through lived experiences. Examining her own learning as she ‘travels through life’, living and working across the world, including in the Middle East, Bateson demonstrates how context shapes how and what she learned. Through Bateson, context becomes both a spatial and temporal element of learning. When read to understand processes of learning, Bateson’s framework of learning ‘along the way’ highlights moments of discomfort, immersion and contrast; learning through having to adapt to, and improvise within, new situations; through questioning experiences over time; and the opportunities for ‘spiral learning’ that emerge from reflecting on a previously lived situation or moment having gained a different perspective. As a theoretical approach to understanding learning in social movements, Bateson’s anthropological perspective offers a nuanced language through which to examine how lived experiences shape learning within a particular space or moment, as well as in the months and years to follow.

Exploring the different spaces and experiences of learning about social reality is a constantly evolving project because social reality is not static, as the Egyptian revolution demonstrates. One of the key ways people experience social change is by participating in social action and movements for social change and, as important sites of knowledge (Welton 1993; Kane 2010), activist experiences can shape and disrupt the way people understand their social reality. Social movements are therefore are a necessary context to investigate learning for social change.

2.3.4 Conceptualising social movement learning

Having established social movements as an alternative to institutionalised forms of democracy, and examined the possibilities for people to learn outside schools, this section brings these together to establish the importance of understanding learning in social movements.

Within social movements, people engage in diverse processes of social change and experience “creative learning” (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:57). The relationships between social movements and the changes they can create at political, social and cultural levels are complex (Giugni 1999) but social movements are important sites of
learning that demand more investigation (Welton 1993; Holford 1995; Foley 1999; Kilgore 1999; Conway 2006; Woodin 2007). Indeed, is surprising how little attention is awarded specifically to learning within the social movements literature itself (Foley 1999; Gouin 2009), and that there has been a lack of empirical studies that can generate a “nuanced conceptual understanding of learning in social movements in development contexts” (Ismail 2009:281). As an antidote to the dominance of social movement theorising that “has been widely criticised for its narrow emphasis on structure and its reductionist view of culture and human behaviour” (Walter 2007:251), examining learning in social movements offers new and important questions to shape understandings of the ‘profound’ and ‘evolving’ learning experiences associated with social activism (Kovan and Dirkx 2003).

Learning within social movements is an important part of broader process of social change (Woodin 2007) and is reflected by two key themes: first, learning associated with movement strategies (see King and Cornwall 2005; Nyamu-Musembi 2005; Wang and Soule 2012); second, learning for critical social change. While out understanding of movement participation more broadly is deepened by recognising that activists learn to become overt in their political challenge (Leach and Scoones 2007) and that they adapt movement practice, the emphasis on strategies fails to adequately examine the potential of learning in social movements for creating what Freire (1970:48) calls “authentic” social change. This is made possible through critical approaches to social movement learning that seek to understand knowledge production within movements (Conway 2006), demonstrating participants’ ongoing learning processes of dialogue and reflection (Foley 1993, 1999) and assesses the potential of activists’ learning for social transformation (Jesson and Newman 2004; Woodin 2007; Gouin 2009; Ollis 2011).

Foley’s (1999) seminal contribution (Gouin 2009), an emancipatory and ‘praxis-oriented’ approach demonstrates the empowering nature of learning in social action, and of its potential to create progressive social change. Through examining learning within neighbourhood housing, community organisations and social movement campaigning and protest, Foley (ibid.) builds on Freire to argue that learning in social action enables activists to understand the roots of oppression and dominance. Through “organised and intentional…educational activities” (Hall and Turay, 2006:7), and through contestation, informal and critical learning (Foley 1993), activists participating in action for social
change experience a shift in their political and personal consciousness (Ollis 2008; Chovanec 2009).

Activism can lead to change in perspective (Mezirow 1991; Lange 2004; Taylor 2007). By participating within a social movement or in forms of social action, studies of social movement learning have shown it is possible to create new understandings of the world, build the capacity for change and “hope for an alternative future” (Hall, Clover, Crowther and Scandrett 2012:xv). However, it is noted that ‘social movement learning’, theoretically and as a field, lacks a clear definition (Chovanec, Lange and Ellis 2008) and is ‘underconceptualised’ (Hall and Turay 2006:12). While social movement learning is a field with roots in Marxist thought and Gramscian and Freirean approaches to transformative and emancipatory social change, the theorisation of the pedagogical processes through which people develop progressive understandings is less clear. I therefore examine processes of critical learning in social action in the remainder of this section.

2.3.5 Processes of learning and unlearning

In the previous section, I established that studies of social movement learning have highlighted that activists gain skills, and develop critical perspectives of the world. However, there are gaps in the conceptualisation related to the processes, and implications of, learning in social movements. This section looks more closely at how people learn in a movement for social change.

Definitions of learning tend to emphasise processes that lead to acquisition - the gaining or deepening of new knowledge or understandings (Vanwynsbergh and Herman 2015). For instance, Levy (1994) refers to learning as the analytical process of critical interpretation of events that leads to new or changed understandings, beliefs or attitudes, implying that perspectives change through taking in something new. Illeris (2007:3) offers a broader definition: learning, he argues, is “any process that…leads to permanent capacity change”. Working within these definitions would produce explorations of what and how activists develop, and the changes that they experience in understandings and capacities. Learning for social change, in this perspective, is every process that leads to some kind of change.
The focus on learning as acquisition and capacity change, therefore, leaves gaps in the understanding of how people arrive at their changed understandings, beliefs, attitudes or capacities, and whether learning something new requires a particular process in relation to a previously established ‘truth’. Arguing that unlearning is a process deeply connected to learning, Foley (1999:15) establishes that, social action provides the context for “the unlearning of dominant discourses and the learning of resistant discourses [which] is central to emancipatory learning”. However, the account of what it means to unlearn, or analysis of how unlearning happens, is lacking in the conceptualisation of social movement learning. When reminded of the invisibility of power (explored in section 2.1.2), the unlearning of dominant discourses becomes an important dimension of learning in struggle that warrants further investigation.

Scholars of knowledge management and organisational change apply ‘unlearning’ to conceptualise learning at the macro level. Hislop, Bosley, Coombs and Holland (2014:542) concur with Tsang and Zahra’s (2008) assessment to define unlearning as the “abandoning or giving up knowledge, ideas, or behaviours”. As with processes of informal learning (see Schugurensky 2000a), they note that unlearning has been theorised as being both conscious and unintentional, but that it is more critical than ‘forgetting’. Unlearning should be understood as a conscious process of radical deep unlearning where assumptions are questioned (Rushmer and Davis 2004). The conscious nature of unlearning exposes an emotional and critical dynamic involved with processes of learning that are not evident when learning is understood as acquisition of knowledge. For example, MacDonald (2002:173) argues to “let go” involves “unlearning well established emotional responses, familiar ways of seeing, and habits of control and domination”. Three steps are necessary for unlearning where assumptions are questioned and old ‘truths’ are rejected: receptiveness, recognition and grieving (Boyd and Meyer 1988; MacDonald 2002). These dynamics of unlearning as processes that are emotionally and intellectually challenging present theoretical questions for conceptualising learning in struggle and processes of critical reflection, particularly when experienced in moments that are challenging.

While the concept of unlearning has been criticised for lacking adequate definition (Howells and Scholderer 2016), it has been used to explain how learners experience
personal growth and transformation through being open to new perspectives, able to recognise an insight about themselves and experience the “involuntary disruption of order - the previous assurances and predictable ways of interpreting reality and of making meaning collapse” (Boyd and Meyers 1988:278). Having established the centrality of power and truth to learning for social change, there are theoretical questions to be considered about the specific processes of learning and unlearning about power and discourse in contexts such as social movements. Further enquiries into conceptualisations of learning and unlearning require in-depth qualitative research to focus on the conscious processes of micro-level individual unlearning in a range of contexts (Hislop et al 2014:542).

Drawing on Foucault’s theory of ‘totalising discourses’, Foley (1999:16) demonstrates the way particular discourses control “whole areas of human life”, arguing that emancipatory learning begins with critique of those dominant discourses. In other words, developing new understandings requires “critical thought - a constant checking” (Foucault 1982:778) of power relations within society. In contrast to learning as acquisition, unlearning can be understood as a specific form of critical engagement with discourse and ‘truth’. Highlighting the importance of understanding how movement activists challenge ‘truth’, Harley (2012) applied Badiou’s concept of ‘sustained investigation’ to argue that movement militants generated new truths by reflecting on an event and its implications: “a truth punches a ‘hole’ in knowledges, it is heterogenous to them, but it is also the sole known source of new knowledge. We shall say that the truth forces knowledges” (Badiou 2005, cited in Harley 2012:9).

A critical approach to unlearning may help to explain activists’ conscious engagement with ‘truth’, and the processes of questioning assumptions upon which those ‘truths’ are built. It may also reveal the critically conscious dimension of learning as a creative, ongoing process of challenging contradictions and opening discourses to the exploration of multiple truths (Kilgore 2001). Unlearning has been presented as a theoretical tool through which to understand how ‘Westerners’ could look beyond their own situation and acknowledge the ‘other’ and ‘non-Western’ ideas (Williams 1958, cited in Hislop et al 2014). Therefore, theories of unlearning may also hold emancipatory potential and further understandings of how activists experience ‘deep unlearning’ (MacDonald 2002) that enables them to question assumptions that underpin the way they view the world and
break with habits (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015). In the next section, I apply theoretical questions raised about unlearning to question how, and in what ways, learning and unlearning can lead to social transformation.

2.3.6 Learning as and for ‘transformation’

Throughout this section, I have reflected on theoretical approaches to understanding learning in processes of social change. To bring these reflections together, I build on the idea that there are certain ideas – discourses and ‘truths’ – that need to be learned and unlearned by drawing the distinction between theories of ‘transformation’ or ‘transformative’ learning. I highlight the progressive approach to learning I adopt for investigating learning in social action in the remainder of this thesis.

Transformation and transformative are terms used with two purposes: first, to show learning can be ‘transformative’ for the individual learner or group; second, to argue it is a particular kind of learning that will lead to the ‘authentic’ transformation of society (Freire 1970; Allman 1999). Adult educators have argued that, as people’s perspectives are transformed, they come to new ways of knowing and experience the critical reflection required to change or transform social norms (Mezirow 1990). Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning examines the micro and macro dimensions of learning, though, importantly for a critical project of social change, not always with “an explicit criticism of the social and political arrangements” that require social transformation (Hart 1991:128).

Through examining processes that lead to the transformation of the individual, there can be further insights into processes of learning that enables individuals to arrive at a form of collective solidarity (Mezirow 1981) and lead towards collective transformation for social change (O’Sullivan 1999, cited in English and Mayo 2012). Studies of social movement learning emphasise the collective nature of learning and producing knowledge in struggles because it is an emancipatory process of “reading and transforming the world together” (English and Mayo 2012:200, emphasis in original). However, the few studies of unlearning within organisations at the micro level demonstrate the potential for advancing conceptualisations of learning because individual learners can also be
analysed in relation to a given context rather than just from a developmental or psychological perspective (see Hislop et al 2014).

Connecting theories of unlearning to studies of social movement learning and conceptualisations of critical consciousness, this exploration of learning in struggles for social change examines processes of acquiring, deepening and reinterpreting knowledge, understandings, skills and capacities, and conscious unlearning of ‘truths’. A critical approach of learning for social change specifically examines its emancipatory potential to create progressive social change: issues of power and oppression; coming to understand the way the world is and developing a critical consciousness of the way the world should be; and of the role of individuals and groups in creating progressive social change. It is this normative perspective that would lead to ‘social transformation’. In the following section, I examine the implications of learning in social action on activists and their trajectories as agents within processes of social change.

2.4 Implications of learning through struggle

In the previous section, I established that people who participate in movements for social change or who engage in social activism to create a better world learn through their experiences. This section looks at the implications of this learning. It takes an agency-driven approach by reflecting on the connections between learning in social action on activists’ critical and political consciousness and sense of empowerment, and develops this further by reflecting on the implications of learning in struggle for activist trajectories.

2.4.1 Building a critical-political imagination

In this chapter, I have established the importance of critical consciousness in processes of creating progressive ideas of social change and, through insights from social movement learning, showed that activists can develop critical consciousness through participating in social action. In this section, I examine how becoming critically conscious impacts activists’ view of the world and the actions they take to change it.
Meyer (1999:186) argues that, “individuals who have forged a worldview through the struggle of a social movement will make different kinds of decisions in all sorts of contexts” and will be less likely to accept the world as it is because their perceptions of the world and how it should be changes. Similarly, studies of activists’ commitment have concluded that, by participating in social movements and social action, activists develop deeper understandings of the issues and acquire “activist-relevant skill and knowledge” (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013:198). However, analyses of outcomes focus on structure and policy. This has limited the necessary theoretical connection between activism and the understanding of social change that emerges from social movement participation.

Critical pedagogues exposed the violence of assuming schooling and education to be good because educators impart ‘knowledge’ (see Freire 1970; Carr and Hartnett 2002; Giroux 1991; Gandin and Apple 2002; Apple 2006, 2011) and the same reflectivity is relevant for the study of social movement learning. Chovanec (2009) argues it is impossible to engage in activism without experiencing or engaging in some degree of reflection and suggests that activists’ critical view of the world emerges from the processes of critical engagement. However, “just as individuals learn useful knowledge and practices, they are also capable of learning bad habits, ineffective behaviours, or incorrect information. Social movements are no different. Learning does not always produce optimal outcomes” (King and Cornwall 2005:28). The existence of far right, religious extremist and other ‘ugly’ movements (Haenfler, Johnson and Jones 2012; Gillan & Pickerill 2012) suggest analyses must proceed with caution: it cannot be assumed that all social action – or activism - engenders the kind of reflection and critical imagination required for progressive social change, or that the conceptualisations of what makes a ‘better world’ are shared by every person who participates. The outcomes – the perspectives and capacities – of movement participation cannot be taken for granted.

Gaventa (1995:31) argues there are specific political competencies required for building democracies that are connected to citizen knowledge, consciousness and structures of power and that it is within this dimension of power that “political beliefs and ideologies” are shaped. He also highlights how internal, individual competencies are developed through spaces of democratic discussion and analysis, noting that they make take many forms and adopt a more nuanced language of power. Similarly, a sense of one’s own political capacities is essential to developing what Beaumont (2011: 217) refers to as part
of the “democratic condition”, where we recognise ourselves as political beings with political capacities. Through social action, people become critically conscious of politics as a struggle between groups for power: they are ‘politicised’, a form of consciousness compels people to display “explicit motivations to engage in such a power struggle” (Simon and Klandermans 2001:4).

Analyses of the 25 January revolution concluded that participating in the uprisings led to politicisation (della Porta 2014) and showed there are many people who, prior to 25 January, had not engaged in public politics or struggles for social change but whose experiences were ‘life-changing’ (Marfleet 2016). Social action, therefore, is a way learn about, and critically reflect on, issues of power, justice and democracy in a collective context through which people become politicised to take action and challenge the ways in which power shapes their daily lives. Recognising that conscientisation comprises both reflection and action, assessing the extent to which learning in social movements generates a critical and progressive view of the way the world ‘ought to be’ (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015) must be accompanied by an analysis of critical consciousness and its relationship to future action, the focus of the remainder of this section.

2.4.2 Commitment to further action

In the previous section I established that critical consciousness could lead to a changed view of the world, an understanding of power and, subsequently, ‘politicisation’ (Simon and Klandermans 2001). In this section, I look more specifically at how learning in social movements shapes further activism.

Through a socio-political learning framework of political socialisation, Beaumont (2010, 2011) connected experiential political learning to an increased sense of political agency and efficacy. By analysing the effects of participating in ‘collaborative pluralist contexts’ on young people, Beaumont concluded that political confidence is developed most significantly in contexts where political engagement is encouraged and people are able to take part in political discussions: “Learning in a politically active community also reveals the human, everyday face of politics…Such experiences can generate feelings of political inclusion, commitment, solidarity, and integrity that foster a sense of political confidence
not tied to the rewards of success alone” (Beaumont, 2011: 218). She suggests that commitment to action is developed not just by being successful but through the critical engagement with political ideas.

Participating in the collective political community leads to empowerment, political confidence and agency (Moore 2003; Pfaff 2009; Beaumont 2011) and enables people to become socialised into the political system (Pfaff 2009). A person’s view of themselves as an actor in the process of social change can be transformed when they are no longer passive recipients of a particular worldview (Davies 2014). By participating, the activist understands that they are actively creating a different world, as Meyer (1999:186) explains: “by engaging in activism, an individual creates himself or herself as a subject [and]…is unlikely to retreat to passive acceptance of the world as it is”. Activists gain skills that increase their self-esteem and self-confidence (Foley 1999), which subsequently develops commitment to action (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013).

The empowering potential of activism can, in part, be attributed to the endeavour to solve collective problems based on a commitment to particular view of the world. Studies of activism demonstrate the empowering nature of activist and campaigners’ learning; they achieve transformation through challenging perceptions of the world, including knowledge, understandings and ways of knowing (Foley 1999). Social behaviourists concluded that “we need to know not just what is right or even in our self-interest but also that our participation will make a difference” (Goss 2010:1, cited in Davies 2014:459). In Egypt, for example, protesters “learned the power of collective action and resistance to corrupt regimes” (English and Mayo 2012:170). Movement participation results in a shift in self-perception that can be empowering and potentially transformative because activists are consciously taking action to create the kind of world to which they become committed.

Foley (2004:44) argues the potential of activism to empower is connected to critical consciousness and reflection because it is through the theoretical distance from activism that activists gain a “greater measure of cognitive, psychological and political empowerment”. Similarly, being conscious of one’s commitment and moral agency means there “is a responsibility to ourselves to align actions with our judgements” (Beaumont 2010:528, emphasis in original) - to be empowered to take action and be
committed to a particular path. Participating in social or political action can be empowering because people develop an increased consciousness of and personal commitment to their view of the world, how it should change and their ability to act. However, while the act of protest can be empowering for the activists who participate (Baum 2010; Lopez 2005), it has been argued that political change comes from ability of the protesters (“the powerless”) to generate a response to their protest in those who observe it (Lipsky 1968). Therefore, while learning in social action may be empowering at the individual level in moments of success, and activists are, through their participation in one movement, more prepared to engage in future activism (McAdam 1989), for activism to be sustained it may also require learning to be resilient in moments of setback, like that seen in Egypt with the 2013 ‘counter-revolution’ (Marfleet 2016).

Individuals who participate in social action may be empowered personally through the fact they are taking action to create the world they want, but it is also important to recognise that continued participation may also be motivated by the social ties and bonds created within the collective experience. Activists develop collective movement identities - the notion of the movement as a ‘we’ - and social ties and networks that can explain people’s continued motivation to participate (see Gamson 1991; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Gould 1993; Van Dyke and Dixon 2013). While these ties are clearly important to understanding how a movement is formed, social ties within movements are also networks for learning and commitment: through cooperation and sharing of existing knowledge, activists are able to judge the consequences of their actions to create new knowledge and take further action (Wainwright 2003).

2.5 Conclusion: a critical approach to learning in struggle

In this chapter, I have brought together literature that examines social change, development, social movements and education as a way to understand a contemporary period that has seen an explosion of ‘pro-democracy’ and ‘anti-neoliberal’ protest movements (Castells 2012; Žižek 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). In this section, I outline some of the questions that this review raised, in particular those related to how engaging in a movement for social change impacts the people who participate. Rejecting the liberal paradigm and the emphasis on institutions and procedures, critical approaches demonstrated the necessity of a normative imagination of progressive social change. This
raises questions about how social movements create new or different perspectives of the world, what kind of social change activists imagine, and how those imaginations are formed.

Recognising that resistance to power can lead to social change, following Foucault (1982), means we need to question the implications of struggle on the people who resist. A particularly important area for further exploration comes out of interpretations of power that focus on relations. The emergence of social movements raises questions about the ways in which power controls knowledge, ideas and the creation of discourses that become established as ‘truth’, including the truth of democracy within liberalism. By highlighting the invisibility of power, we are reminded to continue to problematise knowledge (Freire 1970), to interrogate why we think in a certain way (Allman 1999), and consider how particular knowledge and truths are learned and then challenged. These are pedagogical questions that can explore the extent to which movements enable reflection on, and rejection of, hegemonic discourses and knowledges. This could develop understandings of activists’ trajectories through a deeper connection between learning in social movements and continued movement participation.

Thinking about power as invisible and coercive also demonstrates the importance of continuing to interrogate power as multiple relations rather than a win-lose competition. Power is a dynamic that materialises in structures and institutions such as democracy and education, but can also be generated from within when people understand their power to. A pedagogical analysis of movement learning and power as existing in, and exercised through, relations would deepen our understanding of how activists are empowered through their participation, and how this relates to their commitment to future action.

In response to critiques of representative democracy - the ‘thin’ version -, I looked to participatory and deliberative approaches that offered a ‘thick’ alternative (Apple and Gandin 2002). While there are pedagogical opportunities within ‘thick’ approaches that promote debate and discussion, radical perspectives argue deliberative and participatory democracy led to depoliticisation. Instead, antagonism, disagreement and difference are essential for a truly democratic society because they reinstate the critique of capitalism and foreground ‘the political’ (Mouffe 2005). The pedagogical significance of radical conceptions of adversaries and agonistic confrontation became even more convincing
when connected to the recognition that people learn and unlearn through discomfort, disjuncture and discord (Bateson 1994; Jarvis 2009). Viewing democracy as conflict (Davies 2011) through the adversarial form of politics may offer a pedagogical form of ‘thick’ democracy that is worthy of closer investigation. It could develop understandings democracy and education, and of the pedagogical processes that may be possible in a contemporary context characterised by division and conflict.

Learning theories are weighted towards conceptualising learning as the acquisition of new knowledge with little explicit dissection of what it means to ‘unlearn’. This is despite the acknowledgement that unlearning is critical to an emancipatory framework of learning in struggle (Foley 1999). A wider investigation into processes of unlearning in this chapter raised questions about the pedagogical potential of ‘negative’ experiences. However, having established the importance of understanding how power relations shape activists’ imaginations of social change, a further imperative is for continued exploration of the theoretical connections between learning, unlearning and the kind of perspective of the world that emerges. In a contemporary context that saw activists caught up in violent clashes (as seen in Egypt in 2013 and Ukraine in 2014, for example), examining the links between radical democracy and processes of learning presents an innovative approach to understanding how these negative experiences impact activists pedagogically.

Overall, this chapter has established the importance of continuing to reflect on how people effect, and are affected by participating in, movements for social change. A pedagogical framework enables us to reflect on the potential for future participation because it allows us to think about how people are changed by their activism. It also enables a deeper understanding of social movements by exposing the invisibility of power, and by understanding how activists interpret and engage in creating social change. By focusing less on why movements emerge and more on the ideas and knowledge that they create, progressive theories of social change do not have to focus solely on organisations and structures. Instead, social movements for change can also be understood through the people and the revolution of ideas and understandings of the world because it is these ideas that last beyond the movement event. This would generate a deeper exploration of how to enable learning about power; how power relations are constituted, circulated and challenged; and the extent to which this learning triggers or sustains movement participation.
This literature and the Egyptian context provide a valuable and rare opportunity to explore learning within a revolutionary ‘moment’. It allows us to examine how learning in social movements impacts people’s view of the world, and of their role as agents in creating progressive and authentic social change. Building on these literatures and the Egyptian case, my research question asks: *In what ways, and with what effect, does activism shape understandings of, and engagement with, processes of social change?* In the next chapter, I outline how I approached this task methodologically.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I explain the research process. I begin by presenting the research objective and specific questions. After a brief overview of the empirical case, I explain the research design, including a summary of the case study, the methods for data collection and analysis. I also reflect on the research process, drawing attention to issues of positionality, ethics and language.

The aim of the research was to better understand processes, content and implications of learning in struggle, with a particular focus on activists and their learning. The empirical case contributes to theoretical analysis of the continuing 25 January Egyptian revolution in two key ways. First, research on social movements and the connection between social movement and adult education both focus on movements within the global north (della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Hall and Turay 2006) and has resulted in parts of the world such as the Middle East being neglected theoretically and empirically. As well as detailing on a case based outside the global north, this research also reflects the transnational and global reach of the Egyptian struggle and gives voice to activists who participated within Egypt itself and who continued to mobilise for social change in Egypt while living in the UK. The second theoretical contribution specific to the empirical case is that it draws on a contemporary revolutionary moment. The Egyptian revolution presents a rare context through which to explore learning in struggle and invites reflections on the connection
between moments of revolutionary change and activists’ learning. Therefore, through the Egyptian case, I contribute to theoretical debates of learning in social action and to the understanding of the Egyptian revolution during an historic time in the region (Dabashi 2012).

Although commentators referred to the 2011 events in Egypt as revealing a civil rights movement (Wedday and Ahmari 2012), academic discussion related to the struggle has been dominated by analyses of the causes of the 25 January uprising and of the consequences for geopolitics. Similarly, within academic scholarship, there has been little focus on the period after 30June/3July 2013 or the impact the struggle has had on the activists themselves. This research provides empirical evidence of both and presents an antidote to social movement theory that is dominated by analyses of structural conditions and explanations of why particular social actors act in the way they do. In sum, this research acknowledges the contemporary struggles of activists in an area that is under-represented within academic literature. This is both timely and important and responds to these theoretical and empirical gaps.

3.1 Research overview and questions

The research is guided by the following overarching research question: **In what ways and with what effect does activism impact understandings of, and engagement with, processes of social change?**

I break this down into three specific questions that form the basis of three empirical chapters:

1) How do activists learn by participating in social action?
2) In what ways does learning in social action shape activists’ understandings of social change?
3) In what ways does learning in social action impact activists’ engagement with processes of social change?

To answer these research questions I conducted a qualitative study of Egyptians who had participated in social movements or social action during and since the 25 January revolution in 2011 until the end of the research period in November 2014.
3.2 Qualitative Research

3.2.1 Qualitative research as resistance

Qualitative research recognises the complexities of the social world. Having established a theoretical framework that draws particularly from critical theories of social change and pedagogy, the research design demanded methodologies that allow for interrogation, exploration and deep enquiry. To do this I employ a qualitative “methodologies that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them” (Mason 2006:1).

There is a political importance and theoretical relevance of applying a qualitative approach to this research. Qualitative approaches have their roots in critical understandings of the social world and of the role of people in creating change (Gibbons and Sanderson 2002). As Reinhart (1990:294) argues, “the quantitative is the Establishment and the qualitative is the social movement protesting the establishment. The quantitative is the regular army and the qualitative is the resistance. The qualitative approach is the outside trying to get in…” Qualitative methodologies are, therefore, best placed to explore learning within social action, processes of conscientization and informal education because they give voice to activists’ resistance and open up research space to their perspectives.

3.2.2 Using a case study approach

This research is based on the case of UK-based activism related to the Egyptian struggle from 2011-2014. A common critique of case studies is that the findings are non-generalisable and too subjective to form the basis of scientific research (I address the issues of generalisability in more depth in section 3.5.2). However, case studies are central to studies that seek to understand learning in social action and within social movements (see Foley 1999; Kane 2001; Hall, Clover, Crowther and Scandrett 2012; Hall and Turay 2006; Ollis 2008a) because they enable a deep enquiry through qualitative methods. Although qualitative data is not generalisable (Mason 2006), using a range of methods to explore a specific example or instance of an event or experience
uncovers the complexities of the case (Denscombe 2007). These complexities are necessarily shaped by, and are important contributors to, theory.

Case studies have been shown to uncover how humans learn and that learning happens in context and through experience (Flyvbierg 2006), thereby contributing to wider theoretical understandings of learning in social action. The case selected for this research relates to the 2011 Egyptian revolution and (importantly because it has largely been ignored by adult educators and social movement theorists so far) the continuing struggle (I explore the context in detail in Chapter Four). In the initial stages, the fieldwork was to take place in Egypt. However, late in June 2013, I was finalising the ethical process and thinking about flights for the early autumn. It was in that same week that mass demonstrations on the 30 June 2013 led to the coup d’état and the re-emergence of the military leadership. Tensions increased massively and by August 2014, Egypt had descended into almost civil war (further details are provided in Chapter Four). Following conversations with people on the ground in Egypt about the safety concerns, and my understanding that many Egyptians who had participated in 25 January were living within the UK already, I subsequently redesigned the research to be based in the UK. Data collected was with activists who had participated in activism (within Egypt and/or the UK) between January 2011 and the end of November 2014.

The decision to research Egypt’s revolution from outside the country - namely through the perspectives of Egyptians living in the UK – presented a range of methodological challenges. Researching such an intense period of social change from a distance could arguably result in my missing many of the nuances of the struggle and of how people learned: as one participant recalled from a conversation with a family member who lived in Egypt, being in the UK shelters the observer and activist from the daily struggles of life there. It is possible, therefore, that I would not have access to some of the intricacies of the learning process during the different stages of the revolution. However, while I did not have the daily encounters that conveyed the slow, grinding erosion of hope (and with them the incremental and cumulative moments of learning) that many of my friends in Egypt described, I also did not experience the hysteria associated with specific moments that appeared to leave indelible impressions on some of the activists’ perspectives. Furthermore, I visited Egypt twice during the research period to present at conferences and I was able to juxtapose the atmosphere in Cairo between the two visits. During my
time there, and in conversations between and after, I talked with friends about their changing attitudes towards the revolutionaries, the Islamists and the elections. These conversations were instrumental for my own reflection on the questions I would ask in interviews and the processes of triangulation that would enable me to gather more details of both ideas, understandings and attitudes, and the processes of activists’ learning.

By researching the revolution within the UK, I was more distant from effects of the revolution, particularly because I was not experiencing the danger that activists felt in Egypt. As many of my participants commented, being away from Egypt allowed them to be more critically engaged specifically because they were not experiencing the struggle of daily life: they could, as one said, “be more sane”. It also meant I was not emotionally invested in one perspective over another because, while I had my own positionality shaped by my understanding of social change and social justice, my experience of Egypt had been informed by relationships with people who supported all sides of the struggle. Researching a period of significant change outside the immediate context and one that was characterised by competing narratives required me to be pro-active in engaging with Egyptians from different backgrounds and positions. Researching the range of perspectives was more ethically viable to do within the UK. Interviewing Islamists in Egypt, for example, would have been particularly challenging (in terms of access as a white, Western woman and with regards to my own safety in light of the security services’ wariness of both Islamists and researchers). Meeting members of the Muslim Brotherhood within the UK, however, presented far less risk both to the participants and myself as a researcher.

Although it is important to continue to question the extent to which researching from a distance can uncover the ‘truth’, when researching in an authoritarian context, those same questions apply. For example, the partisan nature of news media is a concern for ‘truth’ within the UK, just as it is in Egypt. On the whole, I was able to gather stories from activists in the UK that may have been missed if the research had been conducted in Egypt, just as the opposite is true. Two key empirical contributions of this thesis are advanced specifically because the research was conducted at a distance. First, the voices within this thesis reflect perspectives (specifically nationalists and Islamists) that are often missing from accounts of the Egyptian revolution; secondly, this thesis contributes
stories of Egyptians living outside Egypt: their experiences of revolutionary struggle and the contributions they made, and continue to make, to creating social change.

3.2.3 Qualitative methods

The research explores activists’ perspectives of and reflections on the world, the events in which they have participated and observed, and of themselves as agents of change. The role of ‘researcher’ was something I was mindful of throughout the project, and I engaged in various discussions about the notion of ‘activist-academic’ with others who researched social movements. Through discussing ethical issues such as reciprocity (see Gillian and Pickerill 2015) and the implications for researching a case associated with authoritarianism (see Smeltzer 2015), I reflected on my selection of, and involvement with, the movements, including the extent to which I could or should be a participant or an observer at events. It also led me to consider how activists within different groups would interpret my presence and therefore how I would explain my research and my interest in the movement itself to the activists. Reflecting on ethical dilemmas associated with researching social movements was a central justification of the choice to adopt a qualitative methodology. In qualitative research, the researcher and researched are both present, active agents and I was conscious that, just as I - the researcher - bring my own understandings of the world to the research, so did each participant. These subjectivities inevitably shape the research process so I employed a range of qualitative methods that would ensure I would explore the various perspectives and subject positions. To engage with the range of perspectives, I adopted a grounded theory approach that “guides the researcher toward examining all of the possibly rewarding avenues to understanding” and “discovery” (Corbin and Strauss 1990:6).

Semi-structured interviews enabled a specific form of qualitative enquiry - phenomenology - to focus on the way individual activists experienced the Egyptian struggle and how they made sense of their experiences (Foley 1999). Reflecting on researching individual activists’ experiences, Badran (2013) argued that using the oral history approach with a female ‘revolutionary’ in the year following the 25 January uprisings allowed her to probe more deeply and, for example, uncover important insights such as the tension activists feel when defining themselves as revolutionary, secular or
even activist. It is only through deep enquiry that these kinds of insights are uncovered and can be explored. Activists were asked about their background, including family history, previous political engagement. I found this provided important context before exploring the complexities of activists’ participation, learning and trajectories. Alongside semi-structured interviews, I conducted ethnographic research as a ‘Partially Participating Observer’ (Bryman 2012). By attending events and demonstrations and observing activists online, it was possible to establish ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1994) in the form of exploration of meanings, motivations, attitudes, ideas and processes based on participants’ own perspectives.

3.2.4 Participants and interviews

During the research period, I conducted and recorded 28 semi-structured interviews and met and talked with many more activists at various events and demonstrations. As semi-structured interviews, I organised the conversation around a specific set of questions and themes (see appendix). This form of interview is “especially useful in studies whether goals are exploration, discovery, and interpretation of complex social events and processes and when combined with participant observation and or documentary methods” (Blee and Taylor 2002:93). In-depth interviews elicit deeper understandings of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of activism, creating a methodology that uses a combination of methods that is advocated within studies of social movements for producing richer data (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002).

The key selection criterion was that participants had engaged in some form of social action or activism during or since the 25 January Egyptian revolution. I began the process of finding participants for semi-structured interviews by talking with Egyptians I already knew within the UK and by attending workshops, conferences and demonstrations related to the 2011 ‘Arab uprisings’. I also contacted people through online forums and groups such as the Facebook ‘Egyptian People’s Solidarity Group (UK)’ and set up a blog page with information about the research and contact details for anyone interested in participating. Contacts and participants often suggested other names to begin the ‘snowballing’ or ‘chain sampling’ (for a brief discussion, see Atkinson and Flint 2001) process. This type of sampling can create dynamic moments of qualitative research by also producing knowledge of social networks and connections that would have otherwise
been missed (Noy 2008). For example, after attending a demonstration in London in March organised by ‘British Egyptians 4 Democracy’, I found an active group of people aligned with the anti-coup position. One activist became a key contact and I was able to observe the activists’ networks and relationships.

When selecting participants to interview, I tried to retain a balance between gender, age, and I interviewed an almost even number of activists whose political persuasions leaned towards secular/revolutionary and anti-coup (I explain the different positions in Chapter Four, Section 4.3). I conducted more interviews with these activists because they were the two groups participating in social and political action related to Egypt during the research period. It is also noteworthy that between February - November 2014 (the fieldwork period), anti-coup activists were particularly active in street action whereas many secular groups had disbanded and activists were reassessing their contribution, engaging more online. I also interviewed two Sisi supporters (nationalists) and talked at length with many more during the presidential elections in May 2014. While the research did not intend to draw differences or similarities between people with different positions, the continuing participation of activists during 2014 allowed me to observe activists ‘in action’. Theoretically, this was very useful because I was able to investigate the third research sub-question on the connection between learning in social action and activist trajectories. Empirically, I have been able to document a period of time and space of Egyptian activism in the UK that has largely gone unnoticed in academic accounts of the struggle.

3.2.5 Partially participating observations

The interviews were conducted between February 2014 (approximately six months after the Raba’a massacre) and November 2014, six months after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took office. The street level observations took place in London from October 2013 and I continued to attend events when possible throughout 2015. During the presidential elections in May 2014, I stood outside the Egyptian embassy for three days, observing the different behaviours and displays of national identity as British-Egyptians and migrants arrived to vote, and talked with people about their reasons for voting in a certain way, their engagement with the struggle before and since 25 January, and their thoughts about how events had unfolded. As well as having many informal conversations during
this time, I was able to conduct unstructured interviews (Fontana and Frey 1994) with people who strongly identified with the nationalist position and supported Sisi’s presidential candidacy.

As a form of ethnographic research, being a partially participating observer (Bryman 2012) enabled me to attend demonstrations and events organised by different groups and organisations, thereby gaining a more thorough account of Egyptian activism in the UK. Although Egyptians are dispersed across the UK (Karmi 1997; Fawzy 2012), the vast majority of the events during the research period took place in London, most often outside the Egyptian embassy but also at Trafalgar Square, Downing Street and Marble Arch. I attended demonstrations after seeing advertisements online through Facebook or Twitter, but as the research progressed activists would invite me directly through text messaging or Whatsapp. At the demonstrations, I observed the activists’ movement practices, for example, noticing the flyers they handed out and to whom, the placards and chants, the prominence of the Egyptian flag or other symbols. I listened to their discussions and shared some of their experiences of demonstrating and campaigning, without committing myself to being part of the group or organisation (see section 3.4.1).

Being a regular face at the embassy during 2014, I got to know some of the diplomatic police who were stationed outside the building. This proved very helpful because I would pass the embassy on trips to London (for example, to meet secular activists at the Stop The War demonstrations in June 2014, or when in London to conduct an interview) and they would update me on recent activity. Through talking with one officer in particular, I gained a fuller picture of activism that was happening that summer. For example, they gave me reports of how regularly the anti-coup movement had held impromptu demonstrations and that one secular activist who I had observed online and had met at one event had protested outside the embassy almost daily.

3.2.6 Researching online

The Internet is well recognised as a space of activism, including specifically within the Egyptian revolution (for detailed discussion see Castells 2012; Hill 2013). In addition to interviews and partially participating observation, I observed activism on social media (specifically, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) and blogs. Online data can be used as
form of participant observation, as Bermudez (2011) shows in a study of political activism of the Columbian diaspora in the UK and Spain. By exploring the content of Weblogs (blogs) and Twitter feeds at different stages of the struggle I had a retrospective opportunity to observe the activists “as the action [was] happening”, a valuable tool to generate questions of ‘how’ (Lichertman 2002:120). The blogosphere is a rich source of data, not without its ethical and methodological challenges, that offers a rich ‘first-person’ insight into everyday life that is instantaneous (Hookway 2008). The opportunity to step back in time to see participants’ first-person accounts at different moments of the struggle assisted the triangulation process and presented a rare opportunity to deepen my understanding of the methods around using online data in studies of contemporary activism.

Internet technologies were also important to the practicalities of conducting the research. For example, online telephony (such as Skype) allowed me to contact and interview activists who were unable to meet face-to-face, and maintain contact with key informants. Although there are challenges associated with conducting interviews using online telephony such as Skype (for example, the practicalities of recording interviews for transcription), participants benefited by having more control over where and when interviews took place (Hanna 2012; Deakin and Wakefield 2013). Using Skype also helped to develop rapport because, as Deakin and Wakefield (2013) illustrate, the participant and interviewer were able to meet online more often than if the interview was face-to-face. This was the case with some of my participants who wanted to continue to share their experiences in more than one interview, and they found it more convenient when they could be interviewed from their own homes.

The growing literature that examines the Internet as a space for human activity and therefore a space of social research also acknowledges new methodological challenges. Kinsley (2013) notes some of the key issues associated with researching what he calls ‘a life online’ that are also highlighted by Hookway (2008) as methodological concerns: the spatiality of the internet, in authenticity of findings in relation to on/offline identity, and the many ethical considerations such as gaining informed consent, also noted by Battles (2010). Therefore, I approached online data (blogs, Twitter feeds, participation in Facebook groups) with caution and use it as part of a wider triangulation process, not a replacement for in-depth critical dialogue or conversation.
I had been following the Egyptian struggle online and in conversation with friends since 2011. Therefore, when it came to starting the research I was aware that I had, to some extent, already been collecting data. I was conscious that my observations of online activism before the research officially began might have influenced my interpretations. Therefore, a grounded theory approach was necessary for my own reflexivity. In grounded theory, “the analysis begins when the first bit of data is collected” (Corbin and Strauss 1990:6) and I reflected on the data and theory throughout the research process through interrelated processes of continued data collection and analysis.

3.3 Analysing, organising and synthesising data

3.3.1 Interpreting and analysing interview data

In this research, dialogic and thematic interviews uncovered significant moments during the continuing revolution that may have impacted activists’ strategies, knowledge, understanding or engagement with social change. As the researcher, I placed myself in dialogue with the data, locating the learning narratives through an iterative engagement with activists’ words and meanings. I also recognise that the creation of meanings is not static and relates to broader narratives that shape how we make sense of the world at different moments. Social scientists have demonstrated that “narratives and counter-narratives form the frameworks through which we conceive of and pursue politics” (Alexander-Floyd 2013:471). Because this research examines how people understand and engage in understandings of the world (including politics), the research was designed to be exploratory and to allow me to revisit activists’ words and meanings, to examine the narratives they created themselves as well as the narratives and discourses that shaped their interpretations. In line with the objective of the research - to reflect on perspectives of, and engagement with, processes of social change and draw on a critical understanding of social change - I used interpretive methods that offered a broader framework through which to analyse data.

Narrative analysis is a form of interpretive enquiry that “helps us to understand ourselves as political beings” (Patterson and Monroe 1998:317) and allows the researcher to draw on the cultural and contextual aspects of the account (Riessman 1993). Reflecting on
lived experience and activists’ stories is also important for uncovering processes of learning. For example, in a study of environmental activists, Kovan and Dirkx (2003) employed a narrative and heuristic enquiry and established that periods of stress are moments of significant learning and self-reflection. Because narrative analysis exposes turning points (Denzin 1989), I also gained insights into what activists perceive as important moments where their perspectives developed or changed.

To conduct the analysis, I transcribed each interview in full (an excerpt of one transcription is in the appendix as an example). I transcribed all interviews myself but after two months of manual typing was forced to change approach. Using dictation software, I listened to the interview on headphones while speaking them aloud into a microphone. My speech was converted into typed text. I found a number of advantages of dictating and having to listen to parts of the interviews repeatedly. I connected with the content of the interview using auditory, oral and visual senses. Transcribing by dictating also complemented the use of fieldwork notebooks by filling in the emotional dimensions of the interview; I could recall the participants’ hand gestures, body language, inflections and pauses. I also translated any comments made in Arabic, sometimes reflecting on the intended meaning behind common phrases and slogans within the interview itself. I produced direct transcriptions in the remainder of the thesis and any awkward or ungrammatical phrases (perhaps derived from the participant having English as an additional language) have been retained unless it was a simple grammatical error such as an incomplete or incorrect suffix. No changes have been made to alter the meaning.

I thematically coded transcriptions using Nvivo. Although I had a list of themes that were grounded in the literature review (for example, politics, democracy, voting), I created new nodes as I read the interviews to act as markers for pertinent points (for example, references to Nasser or the media). I used 45 nodes in total, with superordinate, parallel and subordinate relationships. For example, one parallel node for experience of activism and seven subordinates that specifically related to activists’ descriptions of their activism during a particular period. Essentially, the nodes acted as a filter on a database.

Another use of NVivo enabled the capturing of online data from social networking sites. Participants often made references to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, which I noted
within specific nodes. However, during the scoping phase of the analysis, I needed to get a sense of the activism in the UK. I ran a number of searches and imported data into NVivo for analysis. While I was able to conduct the scoping exercise (establishing that Egyptians in the UK set up over a hundred groups and pages related to the revolution but not all were used regularly), the data was most useful as part of the triangulation process, substantiating participants’ claims that they used Twitter as a source of information and had in-depth conversations and debates online (predominantly on Facebook). I was able to upload photographs, videos and add comments that could be assigned to a particular node. However, it was at this stage that certain technical and physical limitations related to NVivo (regular crashing, corrupting of files, unsupported software updates) and the computer-based analysis (NVivo does not support dictation) prompted a switch in software that has proven to be a valuable learning experience as a researcher.

I had already been using software called Scrivener to write and organise all my research and academic writing so I knew that there were many features I could use to assist in the analysis, synthesis and organisation of my data. I uploaded the transcriptions and nodes exported from NVivo to Scrivener and found that I was able to perform the same theme-based searches within the interview data. While Scrivener did not return the quantitative statistics like NVivo (reporting the percentage of the interview data coded at that node), I had already had this information available within the node downloads. Usefully, I found that within the Scrivener search results that scanned all text, I was able to see at a glance which participants had made reference to that specific phrase and then examine the quotation in the context of the whole interview. Because Scrivener also searches annotations and comments, I had one ‘clean’ version of just the transcriptions and nodes, then used another to add comments where I could annotate using dictation software.

Alongside coding and annotating electronic versions of the interviews, working with physical print outs, creating mindmaps and tables, and colour coding data was essential for completing a narrative analysis because it allowed me to connect with the data more closely. Reading and coding data on a screen, while useful for selecting quotations and finding patterns across interviews, did not suit my way of learning and analysing; for instance, a visual and kinaesthetic learner myself, I find it useful when analysis is supported by colour coding, highlighting and annotating on a physical copy of the interview, drawing lines between related vocabulary to expose multiple narratives within
the same interview. It also aided the writing process because I could recall the specific interviews visually.

3.3.2 Drawing conclusions and generalisations

While generalising data from individuals to the wider population is problematic (Rao and Ibafiez 2003), the findings from qualitative data (including individual interviews) can support the development of theory and understanding of the empirical case (Mason 2006). For instance, while participants may undergo differing forms and processes of learning through activism, the insights from the Egyptian experience can generate new questions and enquiries to develop theory. Grounded theory recognises that social phenomena are dynamic (Corbin and Strauss 1990) and that contexts change. This is important to this research because it has encouraged me to explore the data creatively and for me to reflect on how activists’ perspectives and understandings would also be dynamic and open to change.

Drawing a cause-effect relationship of participation and a changed person may be seen as problematic because it cannot be concretely tested or recreated. However, scholars have argued that “learning can be read into the accounts” (Foley 1999:17) and shown that using the words and experiences of activists themselves is a valid form of enquiry that can make suggestions of how participation can change people (see Mansbridge 1985). While I accept there may be limitations associated with the causal relation of activism and learning, I do not aim to make generalisations. Rather, like many who study learning within social movements, I follow the subjective approach to uncovering learning and ensure it is grounded in continued theoretical enquiry.

Studies of social movement learning predominantly examine what and how activists learn at the same time, depicting learning as a melding of content and process. To draw conclusions and further the conceptualisation of social movement learning, the distinctions require further investigation. I do this by detailing process, outcome and implications in separate chapters (Five, Six and Seven, respectively) before bringing them together in the Chapter Eight. However, there are moments when the evidence I use in the empirical chapters presents some overlap. For example, in order to adequately contextualise and fully illustrate a process of learning, I may make reference to what they
learned through the process. There are two advantages of this approach. First, both the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of activists’ learning are addressed in detail, separately and together. Second, it supports the overall argument that social movement learning is a continuing process where new experiences and learning keep generating new enquiries and therefore new experiences and learning.

3.4 Research design and considerations

3.4.1 Positionality

I spent over two years in Egypt in the late 1990-2000s working as an adventure travel tour leader. I worked closely with middle-class Egyptians based in the head office in Cairo and local providers such as donkey handlers and felucca sailors in rural parts of Upper Egypt, particularly in the towns of Luxor and Aswan. Many of these working relationships became friendships that continued when I moved on to lead tours in other countries. Through these relationships, I got to know Egyptians from very different backgrounds and who held many different views on Egypt’s social, political and economic development. With a strong affinity towards Egypt continuing after my permanent return to the UK, I followed the 25 January revolution in 2011 very closely. Old friends shared their experiences, and I learned about intense disagreements between Egyptian friends and colleagues. I sought to understand how people who had worked alongside each other for many years could be so divided, and why Tahrir Square remained so symbolic and important to some, yet a moment that should be put aside for others.

While my connection to Egypt inspired many of my questions, I was very conscious that my identity as a researcher was not neutral (Skelton 2001); just as my interest in Egypt had been shaped by my friendships there, I had to continuously reflect on how my interpretations could also be informed by this pre-existing connection and my continued relationships with its people. All research and ‘knowledge’ is shaped, to some extent, by previous experiences and understandings of the world. In this case, my connection to Egypt and my prior involvement in social justice and human rights movements influenced my initial reading of the struggle. Coming to understand my own position, I took the decision to include perspectives and insights from different ‘sides’ of the Egyptian debate. Wolcott (2005) argues that, rather than attempting to remove all notions
of bias from research in order to be objective, particular interests and motivations are a necessary driving force – researcher bias and positionality are problematic only when it is not acknowledged. While this provides an important backdrop to discussions of objectivity and to reflexivity in research, social movement research must engage with all movements, not just those associated with the left (Gillian and Pickerill 2012, 2015). I chose to engage with a range of perspectives within the Egyptian struggle in order to examine the many dimensions of learning for social change, not just views of social change about which I was previously convinced. Reflexivity, therefore, continued to be an important process through which I would recognise my ‘bias’ and “anticipate how that affects what [I] report” (Wolcott 2005:157).

Given the research is based on the perspectives of people who have differing - often hostile - opinions, allegiances and agendas (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3), I had to navigate my relationships with participants very carefully, both in how I responded to people’s comments and in how my understandings were perceived. For example, an anti-coup activist wanted me to say I agreed with using the word ‘coup’ to describe the events of 30June/3July. Rather than agree with him, I explained that I understood his position and recognised the sensitivities around using the word ‘coup’ because of the intrinsic link people made to the acceptance or denial of the Rab’a massacre. I went on to explain that, through the research, I was meeting with people who were contesting how the term ‘coup’ had been used to create a particular narration (see Underhill 2016a) of the revolution and of the different groups. He accepted my wish to explore his understanding rather than to commit my own, commented that he was happy that we had the discussion and he continued to be a key informant throughout the research period.

The conversation with the activist about the use of ‘coup’ was a significant moment in the research process for reflecting on my own positionality as a researcher, as someone with a prior connection to Egypt, and as someone who hoped to produce research that would in Pillow’s (2003) terms, be ‘useful’. I had to question the extent to which adopting a particular position in relation to a contested term such as ‘coup’ would result in my being regarded as identifying (and agreeing) with one ‘side’ over the other, and if I was perceived by activists as being aligned with one position, what would this mean for my research in terms of the access to particular groups and the conversations I would have?
The research was cross-cultural (Skelton 2001). I am a blonde, white-British female attending demonstrations that were mostly attended by activists of middle-eastern ancestry. Although this did not create any issues with gaining access to interview participants of both genders, at anti-coup demonstrations it was more likely that I would talk informally with women than men. There could be many explanations for this that may have been shaped by me, as a woman, as well as the female demonstrators who were more likely to catch my eye than their male colleagues. Reflecting another point of tension in the relationship between the researcher and the researched, I detected an interesting shift in attitude towards me from some people when it became known that I had lived and still had friends in the country and that I could converse in basic Egyptian. My position as researcher working on Egypt appeared to have been validated: it seemed I was accepted as a non-Egyptian who had some authority to be interested in Egypt because I had spent significant time there. In some interviews, activists commented that once they knew I had spent time living in Egypt they assumed I would understand the historical context in Egypt. For example, one interviewee admitted, “you have spent more time and seen more of Egypt than me” (Adel, May 2014). Furthermore, many activists said they felt inspired that there were ‘British people’ in the UK who were interested in Egypt and many continued to contact me about Egypt and their activism beyond the research period. These conversations prompted me to reflect on issues of who ‘can or should’ do research that have been raised elsewhere in discussions of qualitative methodologies (see Milner 2007) and reinforced the necessity of triangulation of data and continued reflexivity.

For theoretical and practical reasons, I specifically chose to conduct ethnographic research in the form of a ‘partially participating observer’ (Bryman 2012) and not completely embed myself in any particular organisation or group. Theoretically, this was important because the existence of different groups participating in the same struggle presented the opportunity to enquire into whether activists’ learning is impacted by being part of a group that has a particular understanding of the world. Adopting this role was important to gain access to activists to interview, though I also had to be aware that “settings effect and influence social action” (Ball 1990:162) so I could not assume that everyone at a demonstration or event that I observed would regard themselves as an activist. By attending demonstrations and events regularly throughout 2014, I came to
recognise the people who were particularly active. I made my identity as a researcher clear and was conscious not to give the impression of being a new ‘member’ of the group: I identified myself as a researcher with a keen interest in the Egyptian struggle and as someone who wanted to document its complexities and the role of Egyptians living in the UK. Similarly, early on in the research process, I made a conscious decision to disengage from posting about Egypt on social media, opting to observe others’ discussions rather than contribute myself. Keeping this distance was necessary because it meant I was able to connect with activists who were aligned with the different groups. Importantly, this distance was key to ensuring interviews were focused on the activists’ perspectives and so that I was not drawn into responding to their requests for my opinion. At all times I had to be very careful to avoid any misrepresentations of myself or the research that could be construed as being associated with a particular position.

3.4.2 Ethics

Researching activism in authoritarian contexts presents a range of ethical concerns, for example in relation to safety of participants (and researcher) and the sense that researchers essentially ‘gain’ when they gather useful data that is based on traumatic or difficult events (Smeltzer 2015). Safety was a particular concern. For example, when protestors gathered outside the Egyptian embassy, staff inside the building photographed and took videos of them (and of me). Although this would have taken place without me there, it could be suggested that having a white female researcher present drew the attention of embassy staff to the demonstrators. When protestors challenge an authoritarian regime’s legitimacy and it is witnessed by an ‘outsider’, there may be risks to those activists in the future. Indeed, some activists commented that they no longer feel able to visit Egypt because of concerns for their safety. I continue to reflect carefully on how associations could be made between my work and the interview participants and, following the increasingly violent nature of the government’s clamp down on secular activists in 2015 and 2016, decided to anonymise all elements of the data that could potentially lead to someone being identified. I also took additional measures to remove any notes regarding association or group membership.

Given Egypt’s highly charged political atmosphere in 2013 (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3), I was well aware that, even within the UK, some participants could have been uneasy sharing their political activities or beliefs with others and, even though keen to be
part of the research itself, they would not want (and should not be, for their safety) to be identifiable. After an explanation of the research, all participants were required to give informed consent and were told they could withdraw at any time and ask for specific details within their interviews to be omitted from publications. Conducting the interviews individually also allowed for additional layer of confidentiality, though I should note that two brothers wanted to be interviewed together. Finally, to ensure complete confidentiality, all names have been anonymised within the thesis and publications, and characteristics that a participant felt could reveal or hint at their identity were also removed (for example, a particular combination of dual-nationality). The anonymisation includes one participant who was happy to be identified. I chose to give this person a pseudonym because of the increasingly tense and dangerous atmosphere for political activists. While this person may have been willing to take the risk, the networks of activists are small and exposing their name could lead to difficulties for others with whom they were associated.

3.4.3 Triangulation

This research examined the processes and implications of learning in social action. Participants’ beliefs, ideas and perceptions were explored through a range of qualitative methods that enabled me to corroborate data and ensure academic rigour. While semi-structured interviews generated rich and detailed data that could be recorded and transcribed, I also used unstructured interviews as part of the participant observation process. Because unstructured interviews are “an attempt to understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a priori categorisation that may limit the field of enquiry” (Fontana and Frey 1994:366), they were an important method for investigating themes or ideas that were emerging from the interviews. Semi- and unstructured interviews allow for redirection, clarification and in-depth exploration of the interviewee’s response so were key to data collection and triangulation. Having enough flexibility within an interview to cope with unexpected responses is important, especially because an essential part of the interviewing process depends on establishing how the interviewee “understands their world” (Rubin and Rubin 1994: 44).

As a partially participating observer, I learned a great deal about the context in which activists were mobilising and how the events were organised. For example, I came to
understand why activists felt the Egyptian embassy was such an important space to demonstrate, and I saw the clear division between different positions associated with the struggle. Observations from these events and activists’ online participation were recorded in my fieldwork notebook, and I used mind-maps to record themes and initial reflections. I also used the online syncing tool, Evernote, to make and tag notes and store electronic copies of social media screenshots, blogs, online news articles and images (for example, ‘movement’, ‘Muslim Brotherhood’). The ethnographic element of the research was central to the triangulation process because it sought to “secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” (Denzin 2012:82) thereby enhancing the “completeness of the findings” (Denscombe 2007:138).

3.4.4 Language and recording

All interviews were conducted in English. My basic Egyptian Arabic was helpful during interviews when activists used particular Egyptian phrases or proverbs (most often to recount chants or slogans associated with the revolution). Conducting interviews in English was not a challenge for any of the interviewees, and they would explore ideas in depth, sometimes using an Egyptian phrase or colloquialism to develop a point. I ensured that I explicitly asked for consent to record every interview, however, in a conversation with an Egyptian academic during the planning phase of the project, I learned that many Egyptians were suspicious of being recorded. Once participants had agreed to being recorded, I placed the voice recorder to one side of the table so that it was not so immediately visible: it was not hidden, but was not so ‘present’ in the interviewee’s direct eye line. I also took detailed notes throughout each interview. The conversations with three participants who preferred not to be recorded were written within my fieldwork diary with direct quotations noted specifically for accurate reporting and analysis.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has established the methodological approach used for the research. I explained why I used qualitative methods, in particular interpretive methods such as interviews and narrative enquiry, for collecting and analysing data. I outlined the approaches used to produce research that is grounded in data, is exploratory and context-
sensitive (Mason 2006). Within a summary of the fieldwork period, I noted the activist context in which the research was conducted, and my use of interviews and ethnography in the form of partially participating observer. In the next chapter I provide more details overview of the context in which the research was conducted through a background to the Egyptian revolution and continuing struggle.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE EGYPTIAN CONTEXT

Replaying History: from Revolution to Militarism and back again

Egyptian hands, tawny and wise
Smashing the frames, in thunder they rise
Flared in one voice, see Egypt in the sun
O state of old men, your time is now done

(Excerpt from ‘al-Midan’ by Rahman al-Abnoudi1)

In Chapters Two and Three I developed a theoretical and methodological framework to analyse learning within social movements. In this chapter, I situate this critical framework in relation to important historical, economic, political and social dimensions of the Egyptian context. The chapter is presented chronologically, with brief overviews of Egypt’s colonial past, the 1952 Revolution and the emergence of Nasserism, Sadat’s rule, and the Mubarak era. Section 4.2 summarises the 25 January revolution and significant events between 2011 and 2014, the end of the fieldwork period. This is followed by an overview of Egyptian civil society and UK-based activism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of significant themes that are foundational for understanding and interpreting Egypt’s contemporary political and social context and activists’ responses.

This chapter explores specific periods of change in Egypt’s social and political context in Egypt, and is supplemented by a timeline and key names in the appendix. I demonstrate that, in the years leading up to the 25 January revolution, Egyptian society had changed (Bayat 2002) as had politics, the shape of political power (Stacher 2009; Anderson 2011), and the profile of Islam in the country (Brown 2013). Egypt took a new direction in 2011 when, during 18 days of protest centring on Tahrir Square in Cairo, the landscape of Egyptian politics altered dramatically with the toppling of the authoritarian regime (Dawoud 2011) led by long-time ruler, Hosni Mubarak. Within the academe,

---

1 Cited in Sanders and Visona 2012:232
In this section, I provide a brief summary of the contemporary economic, social and political context in Egypt, focusing on significant leaders and moments in Egypt’s political history. The historical overview begins in 1919, the beginning of a period when “industrial advances, ideological conflict, nationalist fervour, and a war shaped a nation in the process of finding its own direction for development and progress” (Botman 1991:3). This section builds a picture of a fragile and authoritarian political context - important background to understand the Egyptian political consciousness and imaginary between 2011-2014.

4.1 Colonialism and royalty

Displays of Egyptian nationalism like those seen in Tahrir Square in 2011 or outside the Egyptian embassy in 2014, reflect historicised understandings of an important period of change in Egypt. A mass revolt against British rule in 1919 resulted in the 1922 Declaration that recognised Egypt as an independent constitutional monarchy and awarded a title change for Egypt’s then Sultan to be renamed King Faoud I. However, nationalists regarded the declaration as only achieving nominal independence because the British continued to enact various conditions over Egypt and sectors such as defence
remained under their control (Abdalla 1985). The 1923 Constitution established
democratic processes and institutions such as a pluralist political party system and the
sanctioning of a partially free press (Botman 1991), though it also allowed King Faoud
wide powers over political processes (Abdalla 1985) in an attempt for him to consolidate
his new title. Formal occupation of Egypt by the British military ended in 1936, the same
year as King Faoud’s death and the succession of his 16-year-old son, Faruq. In a
symbolic act that was received with hostility by the Palace, the officers of the Egyptian
army swore allegiance to the country, the Constitution and laws of Egypt rather than
specifically to King Faruq (see Tripp 1993). In this act began a ‘power struggle’ between
three key actors that would shape Egyptian politics for the next three decades: a
constitutional monarchy; the nationalist movement (in the form of the Wafd Party); and
the British that continued to exert their power over various decision making processes
(Abdalla 1985).

By the late 1940s, King Faruq had presided over defeat in Palestine, growing resentment
at the presence of British forces in Suez and what Lesch (2004:207) characterised as a
“dilapidated regime”. The impasse in relations between the monarchy, the nationalists
and the British led to the development of a political elite who were unable to rule
(Vatikiotis 1968). The country was “seething with frenzied political unrest” (Abdalla
1985:16) upon which a small group of army officers was soon to capitalise: “the only
organised institution remaining in the state with access to the use of force and, therefore,
to the exercise of power” (Vatikiotis 1968:366). Calling themselves the Free Officers,
this small group of military men “owed their opportunity to the failure of established
political organisations to challenge the ancien regime and the forces of occupation”
(Marfleet 2009:18). And so, on 23 July 1952, the Free Officers seized control of
government buildings and on 18 June 1953 Egypt was declared a Republic.

4.1.2 Nasser: The modern-day pharaoh

After a two year power struggle with fellow Free Officer, Muhammed Naguib, the
Muslim Brotherhood and established political forces, Gamal Abdel Nasser seized the
presidency amid mass popular support (see Kandil 2012). Over the next twenty years,
Nasser invoked great loyalty by implementing modernising policies (Hinnesbusch 1985)
that promoted ‘Egyptianisation’ and nationalisation, including land reform and
nationalising foreign capital and assets (Marfleet 2009). Egyptians traded the improvements to the country Nasser promised for their political participation: they were to accept rule by the Free Officers Army, specifically Nasser, and “stay out of politics” (Shenker 2016:37). Under Nasser, all organised political groups were suppressed (Vatikiotis 1968) except for the Muslim Brotherhood, and strikes and worker protests were prohibited (De Smet 2012b). Nasserist policies controlled the mobilisation of workers by establishing ‘corporatist unions’ (Bayat 2002) which were “organs of social control” that “acted as an electoral machine for the ruling party” (Alexander 2012:111).

The coercive “political quietude” of the masses benefited military and economic elites who, through the removal of any opposition, had all the decision-making power (Shenker 2016:39). Before long, “a new political formation was in evidence - one in which senior military men and technocrats were dominant” (Marfleet 2009:19). With huge significance for Egypt’s political settlement over the next six decades, Nasser established the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a group of Egypt’s 20-25 most senior military generals who would, it was decreed, only convene in times of war or internal emergency.

Reflecting Nasser’s importance, socially, politically and in the Egyptian imaginary, the term *Nasserism* was coined, with five interpretations of the longer-term impact of his presidency:

1) Ideological: “anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism” and the “feeling of confidence in themselves”

2) The magnetic leader: “charismatic personality, autocratic rule, direct connection with the masses, and use of rhetoric”

3) A modernising movement and leader: “transform traditional Egyptian society through the modernisation of its economy and society”

4) A “protest movement against Western colonialism and imperialism”

5) Modern populism: seeking support of “large and influential groups”

(see Podeh and Winckler 2004:1-7)

Nasser died of a heart attack in 1970. The presence of seven million mourners at his funeral in 1970 (Kandil 2012) reflected his popularity among the masses, despite his policy of ‘controlled mobilisation’ that restricted the ability of Egyptian society to
develop itself or for the people to act ‘autonomously’ (Bayat 2010:67). The presidency was handed to Vice-President, Anwar Sadat, who would continue Nasser’s “democratic bargain” approach to leading Egypt (El-Mahdi 2009:11).

4.1.3 Sadat and economic liberalisation

President Anwar Sadat was unpopular both within the army and the public (Kandil 2012), as a result of his approach to domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, he exerted power immediately through ‘de-Nasserisation’ by opening up the Egyptian economy, particularly to the United States, through the Infitah (Hinnebusch 1985). In his ‘heavy-handed’ approach (Bayat 2010), Sadat implemented re-privatisation as the forerunner to structural adjustment programmes; increased foreign and domestic private investment; private capital gained increasing political power (Abdelrahman 2016); and the halving of food subsidies led to the 1977 ‘bread riots’ (Kandil 2012; Achcar 2013). On the global stage, Sadat was perceived as a “sell-out” (Bayat 2010:243) in his foreign policy, notably for having made ‘catastrophic’ decisions during the October war with Israel in 1973 and for turning away from Egypt’s alliance with Russia in favour of pursuing patronage from the USA (Kandil 2012:127).

Despite his unpopularity, opposition to Sadat was limited. Within the general public, there was little organised political protest against his approach of de-Nasserisation (Hinnebusch 1985), though the effects of his creating a new bourgeois class (see Kandil 2012) were felt among the masses; this led to student and worker mobilisation in the mid-late 1970s (Abdalla 1985; Hinnebusch 1985). Within the military, the potential heavyweights that could have posed a threat to Sadat diminished significantly in the mid-1970s. Awarding power to local security forces, Sadat moved many military officials out of political positions, and a number of ‘accidents’ added to the tally of officers who died (see Kandil 2012:146-7). Despite being criticised extensively by friends and ‘international experts’ for being ineffective and arrogant (ibid.), Sadat survived ten years as president before being assassinated in 1981. He had chosen Hosni Mubarak, an apolitical member of the air force but not a Free Officer, to be his Vice-President. Mubarak was left an Egypt that was highly indebted to the USA, authoritarian-bureaucratic and politically repressive, with “widening class division” (Hinnebusch 1985:303).
4.1.4 The Mubarak era

Prior to Mubarak, political debate in Egypt was very limited (Shenker 2016) as discussion was largely uncritical and restricted to accounts of historical events rather than critical engagement or analysis (interviews 2014). This changed dramatically during the 25 January revolution, as “the streets had become parliaments, negotiating tables and battlegrounds rolled into one” (Al-Ghobashy, 2011:np) and people who had never before participated in political action joined protests and demonstrations (Marfleet 2016) and engaged in detailed and complex political discussions. One example of the newly acquired confidence to engage in political discussions is the YouTube video of a 12-year-old boy explaining his reason for supporting protests against authoritarianism, constitutional reform and a ‘fascist theocracy’ (YouTube 2013). The numbers of people attending demonstrations in Egypt rose each day, suggesting more people critically engaged with the demands of the revolution and consciously took the decision to act. However, as the struggle continued, the scale and nature of activism inevitably changed, with people participating in different ways in response to new situations (see section 4.3).

For 30 years under Hosni Mubarak, Egyptians lived under Emergency Law that extended powers to the police, security forces and SCAF. As well as ensuring the rise of the security state (see Kandil 2012), during Mubarak’s tenure Egypt continued to suffer economically as its GDP steadily declined and debt rose (Achcar 2013). Socially, two groups grew in wealth and power: the elite with ties to the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the security forces (Kandil 2012). The military had been marginalised (ibid.) and the police established itself as the necessary tool to keep disaffected groups quiescent (Abdelrahman 2016:5). Politically, Egypt established a form of ‘low-intensity democracy’ that was “barely detectable” (Marfleet 2009:15) and electoral fraud permeated parliamentary and presidential elections (El-Baradei 2012). Education policies established an uncritical or thinking approach to education that created a deficit in political engagement or understanding (see Cochran 2008).

In 1993, Mubarak broke his promise to limit his time in office to two terms. By 2000, the suggestion that Mubarak’s son, Gamal, would take over the presidency had become widespread. Mubarak had succeeded in protecting his position by creating a mythological separation between the office of the President, cabinet and lower components of the state
apparatus (Shenker 2016); however, in the decade preceding the 2011 revolution a new ‘political wisdom’ had changed Egyptians (Anderson 2011) and street protests had spread across the country (Al-Ghobashy 2011; Joya 2011). Two main protest agendas were evident: politics and economics (Abdelrahman 2012; Joya, 2011). There were three core strands to political opposition. First, Islamist movements were dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, which became the most organised and widespread formal political opposition and the largest non-state actor in Egypt with a grassroots base of eighty million people (Wickham 2013). Second, secular groups, such as the National Association for Change and Kefaya (“Enough”), raised various issues of political legitimacy after the suggestions of a fifth term for Mubarak and the transfer of power to his son (Shorbagy 2007; Oweidat et al 2008; El-Mahdi 2009), though they had less influence at the street level than the Islamists (Kandil 2012). Finally, student and worker protests, demonstrations and walk-outs were a regular feature of Egyptian society (see Abdalla 1985; Fahmi and Sutton 2006; 2010; Joya 2011; Ali 2012; De Smet 2012; Soliman 2012; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014), although not widely reported by media within Egypt or beyond its borders.

By 2009, high unemployment within the large Egyptian youth population had seen them become increasingly disengaged with politics, though the ‘Youth for Change’ and ‘6th of April’ movements experienced growing (but still low) membership (Sika 2012). Although protests were low in numbers of participants, Egyptians had learned how to fight back against the state at the local level by using innovative forms of disruptive action such as cutting roads and blocking bridges (Shenker 2016), and used protest tactics that proved useful for the 2011 revolution (Gunning and Baron 2013).

This section has provided a brief chronological overview of the context that gave rise to “political stagnation” (Wickham 2013:1) in the months preceding the 25 January revolution. I outlined British colonial rule and Egypt’s monarchy, which established the conditions for the 1952 revolution by the Free Officers and the subsequent reification of Gamal Abdel Nasser as the man who restored Egypt’s national pride. I noted that Nasser consolidated his position through populist policies that established ‘political quietude’ (Shenker 2016). Through Sadat’s Infitah policies and the redistribution of land, an elite class was created that would continue to prop up the National Democratic Party (NDP) throughout Mubarak’s time in power. By 2011, Egyptians were increasingly divided
along economic, social and sectarian lines, and the military had established itself as “the largest employer of and economic partner to both the public and private sectors” (Salamey 2015:117) and the institution through which Egypt would retain and secure its national pride. In the next section, I look more specifically at the events of the 25 January revolution and the 18 days that led to Mubarak’s downfall.

4.2 The 25 January revolution and continuing struggle

Although there had been organised political protest and action during Mubarak’s rule (see previous section), the 25 January revolution was not anticipated by either supporters or opponents (Al-Ghobashy 2011). Academic analyses have offered various explanations for the uprisings happening in that moment and space, and with those actors. In this research, I build on these analyses by examining the impact of participating in the revolutionary moment on the activists themselves. Before looking at the particular period in which the research took place, this section outlines what is most widely known as the 25 January revolution that began in 2011. Within the chronological overview, I focus on specific moments that were raised by activists as particularly significant. I then draw attention to the social context and divisions between different groups.

4.2.1 18 days of occupation

It is important to note two precursors to the 18 days of uprisings in Egypt most widely referred to as the 25 January Revolution: the murder of Khaled Said in Alexandria in June 2010, and the 14 January Revolution in Tunisia. These two events feature prominently in activist and academic accounts of the revolution and the mobilisation that lead up to the mass demonstrations in January 2011 (see Ghonim 2012; Shehata 2014; Marfleet 2016; Shenker 2016).

Khaled Said, a 28-year-old man from Alexandria, was tortured and murdered by police in June 2010. The incident highlighted the escalation of arbitrary violence by the police
towards ordinary Egyptians since the early 1990s (Abdelrahman 2016). The images that emerged prompted Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian working in Dubai, to establish the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ Facebook page. Through his emotive, first-person posts, written in colloquial Egyptian to connect to Egypt’s large youth population, the page gained thousands of members from across the world (see Ghonim 2012). Activists attended silent demonstrations in the weeks and months that followed, but it was not until 30 December 2010 that 25 January became a potential target. Because 25 January was national ‘Police Day’ – a day of commemoration for the police officers who died during the 1952 revolution - the choice was specific: it reflected the general “disgust” felt within the Egyptian population towards an institution of the state that had become “accountable to no one, self-interested, brutal, and bad at its socio-political and administrative functions” (El-Sherif 2014:9).

Egyptians were undoubtedly inspired by the 14 January 2011 Tunisian revolution (Shukrallah 2011; Alexander and Bassiouney 2014; Shehata 2014) that saw President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali resign after almost four weeks of protests. Even Egyptians who had been participating in activism related to social and political change in Egypt, whether within Egypt or from abroad through online networks, “never imagined” that the protests would result in Ben Ali’s resignation (Ghonim 2012:132). In the days that followed the Tunisian revolution, activists and commentators debated the potential for this kind of change in Egypt. Despite the activists not believing Tunisia “was sufficiently potent to trigger a domino effect in the Arab world” (Shukrallah 2011:3), plans to demonstrate on 25 January gained increasing attention and the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page was soon “buzzing” with activity (Ghonim 2012:153).

Social and online media helped youth movements to organise and recruit (Ezbawy 2012), to publicise and disseminate information (Tufekci and Wilson 2012) and to open ‘civil society’³ (Khondker 2011). However, characterisations of a ‘Facebook Revolution’ have been widely refuted as ‘reductive’, ‘facile’ (Baker 2016:13) and playing into the regime’s narrative that the government represented the people while the protesters were a small group of agitators set to disrupt the country (Marfleet 2016). Practically, “while the Internet was important, mobilisation increased only when the opposition decided to move

³ For a discussion of the extent to which Egypt has a ‘civic’ not civil society see Abd El Wahab (2012).
beyond virtual protest” (della Porta 2014:59). A number of street level youth movements were important in organising and framing the protests (Shehata 2014). When workers’ strikes began in earnest on 6 February, they carried the revolution “into the body of the state itself, paralysing large parts of government apparatus” (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014:189), tipping the balance against Mubarak (Abdelrahman 2012). In short, the 25 January revolution was significant not just for how it was enacted but because it “marked a juncture where new and old actors became locked in a power contest which held, for a while, the potential for redrawing the political map of the country” (Abdelrahman 2015:2).

A key strategy employed by activists within the revolution was the occupation of public space, particularly Tahrir Square - Midan Tahrir - in Cairo (Castells 2012), though protests, demonstrations and sit-ins took place across Egypt and around the world. The regime’s tactic of blocking the internet on 27 January in the hope of quelling the protests by removing the space for protesters to communicate online backfired due to the regime’s inability to counter the use of technology and the activists’ determination (see Castells 2012 p62-66). Despite the Internet shutdown, by 28 January 2011, pictures and videos of the massive demonstrations that included huge numbers of non-activists (Tufecki and Wilson 2012; Gunning and Baron 2013) had reached a global audience. Many Egyptians living across the world travelled to Cairo to be part of the sit-ins. They joined the struggle for Egypt’s ‘social soul’ under the banner of ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’ (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014). Egyptians who were living “in Brussels, in Doha, in DC, in London. Everyone had dropped everything and come home” (Soueif 2012:56).

The protests did not begin with the aim of removing Mubarak from office (Ghonim 2012) or with the belief that they would result in a revolution (Gunning and Baron 2013). However, illustrating the direct connection between the violence enacted by the police towards demonstrators and the increased resolve to continue demonstrating, calls for Mubarak’s resignation gained support after the second of his three televised speeches4 on

---

4 President Mubarak gave three speeches during the 18 days in which he spoke directly to the protesters: his first speech on the 28 January 2011, the second on 1 February 2011, and the final one on 10 February 2011.
1 February and the *Camel Battle*\(^5\) that came the same evening (Castells 2012). More and more ‘non-activists’ joined demonstrations each day until, on 11 February 2011, Hosni Mubarak ‘resigned’. Led by General Defence Chief, Field Marshal Tantawi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) detained their military colleague and assumed control. Illustrating their intention to immediately reinset SCAF as the purveyors of Egypt’s freedom, less than a week later, SCAF issued declarations that presented organised walk-outs and protests as a danger to the Egyptian nation (see Marfleet 2016). The narrative of the military as the protectors of the nation was, despite Mubarak’s demise, seemingly intact.

4.2.2 *Post-Mubarak cracks and fault lines*

Demonstrations and strikes continued throughout 2011 and 2012, largely centring on five goals: “an end to military trials for civilians; justice for the martyrs; swift trials for Mubarak cronies; a minimum wage for workers; and a new treason law to punish those who had corrupted political life under Mubarak” (Ali 2011, cited in Marfleet 2016:67).

Five events between July 2011 and February 2012 were particularly significant in the scale and nature of the violence against protesters and the role of the security forces: the protests at Abbasiyya in July 2011; the massacres at Maspero in October and Mohamed Mahmoud in November; what came to be known as ‘the girl in the blue bra’ in Tahrir Square in December of the same year; and the Port Said massacre of *Ultras* football supporters. These events are explained in more detail below.

Following the violent dispersal of a march in July 2011 from Tahrir Square to the Ministry of Defence at Abbasiyya by ‘plain-clothed’ ‘thugs’, the military’s role in the deaths of protesters became far more evident (Youssef, Arafà and Kumar 2014). In October, at what came to be known as the ‘Maspero Massacre’, at least two dozen Christians and Muslim sympathisers were killed and hundreds more injured as they demonstrated outside the state television centre (Youssef, Arafà and Kumar 2014; HRW 2011). Less than a month later, the military police perpetrated further state-sponsored violence against protesters. This time the security forces dispersed a demonstration on

---

\(^5\) Activists and commentators refer to the violence in Tahrir Square in the night of 1-2 February 2011 as the Camel Battle / Battle of the Camel. In this incident, hired thugs, *baltagya*, stormed the protesters to disperse the sit-ins. The baltagya entered the square on camel back and the army arrived with tanks. See appendices for further details.

92
Mohamed Mahmoud St, close to Tahrir Square, where protesters had gathered, demanding support for the families of the revolution’s ‘martyrs’ (people injured or killed during the 18 days) (Al-Jaberi 2012). In December, a young woman was photographed and videoed being dragged across Tahrir Square by security forces, her abaya fallen open and her underwear exposed (see Hafez 2014). The event became an ‘iconic’ representation of SCAF violence (Pratt 2015) that was evidenced once again at Port Said in February 2012 in the riots that resulted in the deaths of over 70 hard-core and predominantly working class football fans known as the Ultras (see Marfleet 2016:128) who had taken a key role in protecting the revolutionaries during the 18-day sit-in at Tahrir Square (De Smet 2012b).

It was during this particularly violent period that the fault lines between the different actors and sections of Egyptian society surfaced and gave rise to “a triangular contest between one revolutionary pole and two counter-revolutionary camps, equally antithetical to the emancipatory aspirations of the ‘Arab Spring’” (Achcar 2016:67). Under Mubarak, the police had come to represent the state because they were the key institution through which the government enacted its relationship with the people (Carnegie Endowment 2014) so the reaction to the violence perpetrated by the security services was one of shock and confusion: “seeing the army implement brutal tactics usually used by the state security apparatus, people were baffled and did not know how to internalize stories of mistreatment. The Egyptian military has enjoyed a sacrosanct place in the national imagination” (Youssef, Arafa and Kumar 2014:872).

As well as taking part in demonstrations, sit-ins, marches and protests, where the demands included issues of representation and democracy (Marfleet 2016), Egyptians went to the polls to vote on many occasions in the two years after Mubarak, most significantly to vote on whether to accept the new constitution in March 2011 and, in May 2012, to decide their new president. Proponents of the 2011 constitution made the case for a yes (‘nam’) arguing that it was necessary to provide stability and to begin the process of elections. Opposition activists (predominantly revolutionary youth and the secular, leftist groups) rejected the constitution arguing that it would prevent Shar‘ia law from being written out of the document, and that it favoured the election hopes of organised groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and SCAF who could both field candidates immediately (Wickham 2011). The opposition’s argument materialised in the
final round of the presidential election that saw Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood contest the presidency against SCAF stalwart, Ahmed Shafiq. Feeling like they had little choice, the revolutionary socialists - a well established movement within the secular Left - issued their support for Morsi, suggesting it was a necessary choice to prevent the return of military rule (see De Smet 2012b; interviews 2014). The result was the inauguration of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt’s first ‘democratically elected’ president in June 2012.

4.2.3 30 June protests, 3 July coup and the ‘counter revolution’

After having narrowly defeated SCAF’s Ahmed Shafiq, Mohamed Morsi was inaugurated as President in June 2012. Morsi’s tenure would last one year. In that time, he administered ‘sweeping’ and ‘spectacular’ changes (Achcar 2016:73) to the constitution and the legal system, among others inserting Shar’ia law as the main source of legislation, retracting policies to promote gender equality, and awarding himself powers that ensured he was immune from legal redress (see Shenker 2016; Marfleet 2016). Economic and living conditions, already difficult under Mubarak, deteriorated under Morsi (Salamey 2015) and by January 2013 protests against his presidency had grown in scale and intensity.

By April 2013, regular protests against the various changes to aspects of the constitution, parliament and judiciary (see Shenker 2016; Marfleet 2016; Achcar 2016) gave rise to the Tamarod (‘rebel’) movement that began organising a petition calling for Morsi’s resignation and achieved numbers ‘comparable’ to those who protested during 25 January (De Smet 2015). The petition was followed by calls for protests on 30 June that would coincide with the anniversary of his inauguration. The mass demonstrations, organised and attributed to the Tamarod, began on 30 June 2013, the anniversary of Morsi’s inauguration. With the support of Sisi (the defence minister that Morsi himself had appointed), SCAF gave Morsi a 48 hour period in which to resign, before detaining him on 3 July.

Throughout July and August, Morsi supporters across Egypt staged their own sit-ins and protests. The largest sit-in took place throughout Ramadan at Rab’a al-Adawiya Square. The dispersal by armed forces resulted in the death of over 1,000 Morsi supporters, a massacre most commonly referred to as Raba’a (HRW 2013). Amid increasingly
widespread sectarian violence, political figures who opposed the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated their support for the military, though notably El Baradei dissented after the Rab’a massacre (Abdelrahman 2014; Marfleet 2016). “Signalling a reverse wave” (Salamey 2015:112), Morsi’s ouster and the violence during July and August 2013 laid the ground for the ‘counter-revolution’. As liberal and conservative parties focused on trying to form coalitions that could counter the Islamist threat (El Sirgany 2015), one enduring contradiction remained: elites successfully achieved popular support for the counter-revolution but Egyptians still “found themselves undermining state authority one minute and defending it the next” (Shenker 2016:13).

The fractures in the unity seen during the 2011 uprisings in Tahrir Square were laid bare through the counter-revolution: old divisions returned to the surface and Egyptians were identified by their sympathies towards one of three positions: secular /revolutionary, Islamist or nationalist. It is in this context that I examine the shape of activism in the UK.

4.3 Divided activists in the struggle

As the previous two sections illustrate, Egypt’s contemporary context is beset by division. In this section, I provide an overview of the main allegiances and groups within Egypt’s struggle for social change.

4.3.1 Three faces of the revolution: two dominant narratives and the revolutionary struggle

In Egypt’s political sphere, assigning meaningful labels to different parties or locating their specific ideology is highly problematic (Carnegie Endowment 2014). Throughout the research process, analysis and discussion, I intentionally avoid applying homogenising representations through rigid labels (Underhill 2016a). As Baker (2016:4)

---

6 Sectarian division is part of Egypt’s context but its history and a detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this thesis. Bayat (2010: 206-7) noted three key phases of sectarian division in Egypt: the British colonial period; the time during Sadat’s presidency; and in the 1980s and early 1990s, which he refers to as the “height of the Islamist movement”. The characteristics of division at each of those times were evident during the Egyptian struggle. For example, in displays of nationalism, the sectarian attacks against Coptic Christians and the election of Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, as president in May 2012.

7 The debates of whether the events were a coup d’état or not go beyond the scope of this thesis. For interesting discussion see Giordani (2013) and Madr Masr 2013. I explain my position about the implications of such translations from the activists’ perspective in more depth in Underhill (2016a).
reflects, my choice was “intended to challenge attempts to set different types of ‘Egyptians’ off from each other”. However, the three sides within the Egyptian struggle cannot be ignored as they shape so much of how the struggle is represented, narrated, understood and enacted. In the broadest terms, the Egyptian struggle is enacted by people with allegiances to or identifications with the Islamist, nationalist or secular agenda. In the next section, I provide an overview of political engagement and activism related to each position before I look more broadly at activism by Egyptians based in the UK between 2011-2014.

Mirroring the 1919 revolts against British occupation which had united Coptic Christians and the Muslim majority in ways not seen before (El-Feki 1993), the protests during 25 January brought people of all backgrounds together (della Porta 2014; Pratt 2015). For example, young Copts went against Pope Shenouda III’s instructions to stay away from the protests against Mubarak and attended in large numbers (Marfleet 2016), and photographs of Muslims and Christians protecting each other as they prayed in Tahrir reached a global audience (Castells 2012). However, as I explained in section 4.2, in the weeks and months following Mubarak’s resignation (often referred to as the ‘SCAF period’), cracks in the apparent unity of 25 January were highly visible and, as the violence attests, intensified significantly after 3 July and Rab’a. Two dominant forces have emerged, the Islamists and nationalists, and an opposition secular revolutionary movement that continues to find their own narrative of the struggle.

4.3.2 Islamists and the pro-Morsi agenda

The Islamist agenda in Egypt is largely driven by a highly organised group, the Muslim Brotherhood. Established in 1928, the Brotherhood, often referred to as the Ikwan, had a large support base, particularly at the grassroots, as Wickham (2011) demonstrates:

[The Muslim Brotherhood] operated outside the formal political order and sought the comprehensive Islamic reform of society and state. Its primary method to achieve this goal was the da’wa – religious outreach, through preaching in mosques and coffeehouses, as well as providing social services to meet the needs of the poor (Wickham 2011:208).
In the pre-25 January revolution context, the Islamist movement reached its peak in the 1980s and early 1990s (Bayat 2010) but, after initially promising not to field a candidate in the 2012 presidential election, Mohamed Morsi stood in the race and won with a 51.7% majority of the votes with 51% turnout (see Carter Centre 2012). Vindicating many of the concerns that the election was not accompanied by SCAF relinquishing power to a civilian authority (ibid.), the Brotherhood’s political arm - the Freedom and Justice party - was banned in August 2014. In contrast to the emotional high of 2012 when they had elected their president, his ousting, the dismantling of the Brotherhood’s political apparatus and widespread detention of their members left Morsi supporters feeling excluded from Egypt’s political process: boycotting became their only way to express dissatisfaction (El-Sirgany 2015). In 2015, the only remaining organised political group with an Islamist agenda was the Nour party (Dunne 2015).

4.3.3 Nationalists and the populist support for Sisi

The nationalist position is a manifestation of an Egypt that is characterised by the “Egyptian military-industrial complex, the “republic of officers,” and the military’s economic empire, (El-Sherif 2014:9). In the initial stages of the struggle, protests were specifically targeted at Mubarak rather than the military or SCAF. When the army turned to violence, as well as confusing protesters, media institutions struggled to specifically name the perpetrators of the violence as SCAF or army “in fear of tarnishing the patriotic institution that is the army” (Youssef, Arafa and Kumar 2014:882). An historically close relationship between media institutions and SCAF (Dabous 1993; Abdulla 2014), resulted in little direct challenge of the military by the media at any stage of the struggle. Those that did, for example the political satirist, Bassem Youssef, who referred to the ‘coup’ on television and criticised the post-Morsi regime, were ultimately forced to withdraw from engaging in any political comment for fear of retribution (Kingsley 2014; Abdulla 2014). Space for criticism of the regime narrowed further with record numbers of journalists imprisoned in 2015 (Jackson 2015).

Because the Egyptian identity was constructed around the army as the creators of freedom in Nasser’s time, and despite Mubarak’s resignation resulting in the disbanding of the National Democratic Party (NDP), many actors from the Mubarak era returned to the political stage through Sisi’s election (Dunne 2015). With ‘echoes of Nasser’ and his
justification of ‘extreme measures’ by the military (ibid.), Sisi appealed for national unity and drew support from “liberal reformers, social democrats and radical nationalists behind the military command” (Marfleet 2016:171). The media promoted the military (and, by extension, SCAF) as a symbol of patriotism and gained “seemingly unanimous support for the regime and an inflated portrayal of high hopes for the new president [Sisi]” (Abdulla 2014:27). Under president Sisi, Egypt’s nationalists represent a ‘militaristic, populist and anti-foreign’ Nasserist brand of nationalism (Dunne 2015:1) and the acceptance of a securitisation narrative that argues police and security forces are central to ensure Egypt does not succumb to lawlessness and terror (Abdelrahman 2016).

4.3.4 The struggle of the revolutionaries

Attempting to counter the Islamist and nationalist forces are the revolutionaries that include, but are not limited to, liberals, leftists, secularists, workers and human rights defenders whose goal is to continue the struggle for ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’. A long history of protest in Egypt (see Abdalla 1985; Bayat 2010) included the small but growing pro-democracy movement founded in 2004, Kefaya (see glossary), and street demonstrations and growing disaffection in Egyptian society after the turn of the millennium that created a “political incubator” (Ali 2012: 23) where different groups - “Islamists, leftists, liberals and even disgruntled former members of the regime” – were united through shared opposition to the Mubarak regime (Masoud 2011:117).

The protest movement in Egypt had been growing - for example through Kefaya, 6 April Youth movement and workers unions (see De Smet 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Alexander and Bassiouney 2014; Marfleet 2016; Shenker 2016) - over the previous decade (El-Mahdi 2009; Abdelrahman 2015). Despite this, the lack of a wider unifying goal beyond opposition to Mubarak restricted the various strands of opposition in practice: activists did not work together in coalition and the solidarity required to cross class boundaries failed to emerge, limiting the reach and potential of all groups through a “conceptual impasse” (Abdelrahman 2012: 619). Since Sisi ascended to the presidency, the media’s ‘smearing’ of revolutionary activists (Abdulla 2014) has intensified, and they experience widespread arrest and detention amid an increasingly prohibitive and violent political atmosphere (Dunne 2015). Revolutionaries, in particular, have to reconcile the ferocity of the counter-revolution and their role in the return of the ancien regime (see Hamilton
2016; observations and interviews 2014). As they do so, secular/revolutionary activists continue to reinterpret the spaces and processes through which they aim to understand and participate in the struggle (for examples, see Mehrez 2012; Baker 2016).

4.3.5 UK-based activism during the continuing struggle

Activists’ accounts, blogs, books and a small number of academic studies demonstrate that direct action related to the revolution and support for the protesters who occupied squares across Egypt between 25 January and 11 February - including Midan Tahrir which remains a symbol of the revolution - was not confined to Egypt. However, there is a significant gap in the empirical evidence of how Egyptians across the world participated in and engaged in Egypt’s social and political development, both before 25 January and since.

Data collected during this research established that Egyptians living in the UK participated during the 18 days in many ways, individually and within organised collective action, in street demonstrations and online. Many travelled straight to Egypt to participate in the 25 January uprisings (also exemplified by Adhaf Soueif 2012; Ramadan 2013). Hundreds gathered at demonstrations outside the Egyptian Embassy in London each day; others met at the BBC buildings in Manchester and other city-centre locations across the UK such as Edinburgh and Birmingham. They set up activist groups and numerous Facebook groups and pages identifying themselves as Egyptians in the UK acting in solidarity with the protesters; individuals found themselves becoming media spokespeople for news outlets across the world. Other UK-based Egyptians facilitated logistical organisation, gave medical advice and disseminated real-time updates and information about events through Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. British-Egyptian doctors used their expertise to support their Egyptian counterparts with the medical consequences of the struggle by establishing connections with Egyptian doctors and hospitals to provide various forms of support and training.

As the revolution continued, the landscape of Egyptian activism in the UK was, as in Egypt, characterised by the Islamist, nationalist and secular/revolutionary agendas (see above, sections 4.3.1-4.3.3). Particularly in the period before Rab’a, secular/revolutionary activism continued through a small number of British-Egyptians
and Egyptians living and working in the UK. These activists continued to engage in Egypt’s changing political situation during the post-Mubarak period by returning to Egypt to participate in sit-ins, demonstrations and elections. Activists held demonstrations outside the Egyptian embassy in Mayfair, London, and organised events and meetings to discuss aspects of the political transition such as the 2012 constitutional referendum and presidential race. The scale of activity increased again during 30 June 2013 when solidarity demonstrations were held at the embassy in support of the 30 June protests calling for early elections, and later by Morsi supporters against the 2013 ‘coup’.

Although not necessarily identifying as ‘Islamist’ or with the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation, British-Egyptians who supported Morsi as the elected president established an active, street-level campaign that would continue for the following 12 months. Many Egyptians travelled to Egypt to participate in the sit-in at Rab’a. UK-based Egyptians established numerous activist groups that held regular (often weekly) ‘anti-coup’ demonstrations to protest against the Rab’a massacre, Morsi’s continued detention and, later, the actions of (and tacit support for) the Sisi regime. Following the Rab’a massacre, street-level activism in 2014 in the UK was dominated by anti-coup protesters, though a small number of individual secular activists identifying with the revolutionary goal of removing military rule continued to demonstrate in London and online. The apparent retreat of organised secular opposition groups was evident during the presidential elections in 2014 with Sisi supporters holding celebratory demonstrations on one side of the street outside the embassy and ‘anti-coup’ Morsi supporters on the other. In sum, activists from across the divide (and Egyptians with no activist connections) report that the groups, allegiances, divisions and characteristics in Egypt are replicated within the UK.

4.3.6 Voting from within the UK

Very few studies have provided details of the size or nature of the Egyptian population within the UK. In what remains the seminal contribution to the field, Karmi (1997) suggested that the actual population was much more significant than in the official figures of 22,582 and noted anecdotal estimates by Egyptians that suggested a more realistic estimate of 100,000. Also using self-reported data, the recent census reports a population of 29,000 Egyptian-born residents living in the UK (ONS 2011); this figure
should be approached with caution, given the seemingly little increase in the intervening 15 years and that the more recent study cites estimates of 250,000 (Fawzy 2012).

Few Egyptians record their details in the relevant consulates or have contact with the embassy, largely because “diplomatic missions…focused on establishing Egyptian pro-regime groups to use against the Egyptian expatriates opposing or criticizing the regime policies when necessary” (Fawzy 2012:47). Following campaigns by some of the 3.7 million Egyptians living abroad (Brand 2014), a resolution was passed in 2011 to allow expatriates to vote in elections (El-Baradei, Wafa and Ghoneim 2012), though it still required registering with the embassy and having access to appropriate Egyptian identity documents. With such unreliable statistics, it is highly problematic to draw conclusions about the level of participation in the elections since 2011. However, in a conversation with an embassy official during the course of the research, I was told that the numbers of people registered to vote in the Sisi-Sabahi election in 2014 reached over 7000.

4.4 Conclusion: The struggle to break with the past

This research examines the perspectives of Egyptians and British Egyptians who have lived within a Western liberal democracy and therefore reflects understandings that have been shaped by the experiences of being both ‘within’ and ‘outside’ those debates. The fieldwork was conducted during a highly significant period of the counter-revolution - the six months leading up to and after Sisi’s election in 2014. It was a tumultuous time in Egypt and for Egyptians living beyond its borders, and the events of 2011-2014 impacted participants’ emotional connection to Egypt in many ways: their understanding of and engagement with politics, protest and forms of political expression; their relationship and emotional connection to Egypt’s history and future; and, importantly, the context in which they would continue to participate:

For many participants they involved life-changing experiences – in the case of Egypt, tens of millions of people engaged for the first time in public politics and in a host of novel social and cultural initiatives that marked the events as a ‘carnival of the oppressed’. Among the repeated slogans of countless demonstrations and rallies was an insistent, ‘We’re never going
back’ – an assertion that return to the autocracy, fear and immiseration of the Mubarak era was unthinkable. But less than three years later Egypt had, apparently, ‘gone back’. Military intervention had brought to an end the multiple expressions of democracy from below: individual self-expression evident in public protests, marches and millioneya (‘million-man’) rallies; new political parties and novel media initiatives; community actions; street theatre and performance art; and collective organisation among workers that placed labour at the centre of the movement. Police and troops had returned to city squares, independent media had been closed, and political parties and networks prominent in the earlier events had been banned and thousands of their members imprisoned. A police state had been reinstalled, as security forces and intelligence agencies operated with the impunity of the Mubarak era. In a demonstrative statement by the new army regime, revolutionary graffiti had been whitewashed. A counter-revolution had taken effect with almost the same speed that characterised the uprising of 2011 (Marfleet 2016:xii).

Analysts continue to reflect on the many different moments that preceded and followed 25 January 2011. An historical reflection of Egypt’s contemporary modern history demonstrates the significance of Nasser in creating the contemporary form of militarised and populist nationalism that thrives off fear of the ‘other’ (Dunne 2015).

Political choice and the political process in Egypt had been further reduced to a shallow form of democracy where the candidate of the regime secures the presidency with 97% of the vote. As Shenker (2016:14) argues, “post-Mubarak Egypt has staged election after election after election, and in the process has delivered less and less and less meaningful democracy”. For the activists participating in movements and social action to create social change in Egypt, elections are just one part of a struggle of tremendous highs and terrifying lows; the struggle is a broader, bigger task of changing minds and breaking with its past. The remainder of this thesis explores how and with what effect activists’ experience this struggle.
CHAPTER FIVE

PROCESSES OF LEARNING IN STRUGGLE

There is no theoretical, intellectual knowledge without tasting... You really have to be embedded in life at the existential level so you are part of the world. The revolution was a way of tasting all of these things from 25 January up to this day (Ayesha, April 2014).

In Chapter Two, I established that important learning can take place outside formal institutions of ‘schooling’ (Giroux 1991) and through the experiences of life that means we learn ‘along the way’ (Bateson 1994). I have argued that social change could be better understood if there were more recognition of activists’ thinking and understanding - the movement’s ‘cognitive praxis’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) - in addition to the focus on what they do. I established that social movements are an important site of learning where, through participating in social action, activists create new understandings and perspectives of the world, and develop new skills and capacities to be part of creating social change. I showed that social movement learning is a useful (but under-theorised) approach through which to better understand the ways in which activists come to think about and understand about the world and their place in its transformation towards more socially just societies.

Critical pedagogues, adult educators and learning theorists argue against the ‘impoverished’ (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015) nature of knowledge transmission and ‘banking’ conceptions of education (Freire 1970) that perpetuate structures of power, dominance and oppression (Giroux 1991). These critical approaches to education and learning recognise that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by the various dynamics of power (Kilgore 2001). It follows, therefore, that as society continues to change, further enquiries are necessary to understand how different and alternative forms of knowledge within society are created. The first research question addresses this concern: how do activists learn by participating in social action? To answer this question, this chapter explores the ways in which activists learn when participating in movements for social change - the processes, moments and experiences that create opportunities for new and different knowledge, understanding, perspectives, skills and capacities. In the following chapter, I connect these hows of learning to what activists
learn. Chapter Seven then brings the what and how together to show the continuous nature of social movement learning as a dialectic of process and outcome by looking at the implications of learning in struggle.

As this chapter progresses, it becomes clear that there are many points where elements of activists’ learning cross over. For instance, some of the ways in which activists learn are connected, and there are some seemingly indivisible links between how, what and with what effect (the three research questions and chapters). Although, on the whole, these three dimensions of learning are treated distinctly within the three chapters, where necessary I include reference to the what (content) or implication (outcome) in this chapter in order to provide appropriate context or explanation of the data.

This chapter is organised into three key themes. In the first section, I show that activists learn through the experience of participating in the Egyptian struggle and their interactions with others in a group setting. Activists learn from discussions, debates and knowledge sharing with people who have different or more/less developed perspectives, experiences and knowledge, and they improvise and adapt to the group context. The second section focuses on the ways that individual activists learn through witnessing, observing, reflecting and questioning. They seek out new information and deeper understandings by engaging in self-directed learning (Schugurensky 2000a) that enables them to make connections between knowledge and experience. The final section explores activists’ experience of critical reflection to illustrate its importance as a learning process that connects group and individual moments and, importantly, generates opportunities to unlearn. By detailing individual learning within the collective context, I examine processes of learning and unlearning that emerge from the ‘whole experience’ (Foley 1999) of participating in a struggle for social change.

5.1 Learning through active participation with others

In this section, I show how being actively engaged in social action and social movement generates moments and processes of learning. I show that participating with others and
creating a space of resistance – for example, through sit-ins, protests and events organised by Egyptians - enables activists to engage in discussion and reflection with people who hold different or more/less developed views to their own. Informal learning collectively is incidental and tacit, with awareness of the learning sometimes taking place retrospectively (see Shugurensky 2000a).

5.1.1 Learning through difference and diversity

People learn through being immersed in a culture, adapting and improvising to respond to new situations and new experiences (Bateson 1994). While the examples Bateson uses to support her position come from observing how she, her family and other migrants adapted to a new life in Iran, her insights into learning through improvising and adapting offer some scope for understanding how activists learned through the practices of sit-ins during the Egyptian struggle.

Activists established numerous sit-ins during 2011 and 2012, for example, in Cairo and Alexandria, and the practice was employed by Morsi supporters in 2013 at Raba’a (and others). The occupation of public squares created spaces and moments where activists were immersed in the experience, sharing spaces, meeting new people and engaging in new practices that required them to improvise, most notably in how they interacted and related to the people they were with. Mona notes:

> When you got to Tahrir everyone trusted each other and it was a safe Egypt and you could just go into the square and have conversations and talk with anyone and everyone about everything and it was a whole different Egypt (Mona, November 2014).

With a similar emphasis on the creativity within the experience and the openness between activists in Tahrir, Amira recalls how “everyone gave space to others. No-one impinged on your space whatsoever, whether man, woman, child, old, young…” (Amira, April 2014). Activists improvised and adapted to this new way of being with other Egyptians.
Many activists suggested that the sit-ins became a space where people established and created new relationships and ways of being with others. People had interactions with others in ways that were different from their previous experiences. When activists talked about the people they met, the topics of conversation and the behaviours people displayed towards each other in these spaces, they recognised they had adapted to the unique situation. Because many activists stayed at the sit-ins for a number of days, it is possible to see the sit-ins as spaces and practices that generated new ways of being through which activists became immersed and subsequently learned. While Bateson’s theory of learning drew on being immersed in a new country and its culture, when Egyptian activists like Mona spoke of ‘a whole different Egypt’ they demonstrate that, through the sit-ins, they were learning and creating a new culture. The learning processes of improvising and adapting to new people, conversations and experiences within the new space generated new ways of knowing (Foley 1999).

Although individuals who experience the same event or moment may develop different perspectives (see Chapter Six for discussion of what activists learn), the lived nature of activism is an important dimension for analysing how activists learn. Movement participation can be pedagogical because it brings people from different backgrounds together. The level of diversity within the movement impacted the extent to which activists were exposed to ideas that were different to their own and, therefore, shaped their learning. Activists spontaneously organised ‘popular committees’ to guard Tahrir Square and it became a space where activists could talk with people they would never normally meet, exploring the events with people from different backgrounds:

[I] spent the whole day debating with people, people who were against you, people who were with you, people who share different views or don’t… that was one really important thing about Tahrir Square - meeting different people: Muslim Brothers, Sufis, Christians…to see the real Egypt (Ali, May 2014).

Because people of all different backgrounds and from across the ideological spectrum came together and united around the idea of removing Mubarak, 25 January was described by some activists as “utopian”. However, the protests after Mubarak’s resignation were characterised by a far more homogenous activist demographic.
Particularly after 30June/3July, the ideological differences between three key groups, secular/leftists, Islamists and nationalists became more evident (for more detail see Ch4 section 4.2). These different perspectives of social change in Egypt became evident in the composition of activists at demonstrations - whereas during the 18 days Islamists, secularists, leftists, nationalists were all together, this kind of “utopian surface unity with the common goal” (Heba, May 2014) was not the case as the struggle continued, as evident in the division between different groups.

At demonstrations and in online spaces during the 18 days, many of the activists had conversations with people who were outside their normal social networks (though some subsequently created new networks with people they met). Tahrir was “a platform for us to express our views, [where] all boundaries were broken” (Ali, May 2014) and a moment where “people talked about everything and anything” (Ahmad, August 2014). The 18 days exposed activists to people who had different backgrounds, experiences, skills, knowledge and perspectives of what change they were looking for in Egypt. The “silent agreement between everyone” that enabled activists from “different orientations and ideologies” to discuss and debate openly (Amira, April 2014) was often cited to justify the description of the 18 days in Tahrir as ‘utopian’. As well as highlighting the 18 days as the time during the struggle when there was a common goal, activists suggested there was a new “civility” (Ahmad, August 2014) and openness in this ‘utopia’ that enabled them to have discussions that had a quality to them which had not happened before or since. They suggest that interacting within a context that has been shaped by a diverse range of people creates valuable opportunities for learning.

The learning within Tahrir was, for some, transformative because it changed how people perceived each other and other people within society. Some activists suggest there was a respect for people with different views because they were together experiencing the same moment with the same immediate goal. Being within the same physical space (“It was not about identifying as being Kefaya group in one corner or April 6 in another corner, everyone just sort of came together…” Nour, March 2014) encouraged the creation of an imaginary that extended far beyond the confines of Tahrir Square. Although the activists did not know what would come after, they were, during those 18 days, sharing the experience of finding their own voices within a space that, through its occupation, had become a space of resistance (Featherstone 2008). Interacting with people outside the
usual social circle, therefore, shapes learning in struggle. Being part of a movement or moment of change where nationalists, secularist, Coptic Christians and Islamists came together in opposition to Mubarak was a unique experience in Egypt and, by being in a space where people from different backgrounds and social groups mixed, activists learned actively from these different viewpoints: “people are mingling at a different level, there is this new space where people can have equal roles, or similar roles, definitely the class structure has been subverted because of Tahrir” (Ayesha, April 2014). While there are many who would challenge Ayesha’s claim about class, she does highlight the learning opportunities that came from the diversity within the square. Activists were surprised by some conversations, and challenged by others. Sometimes the interactions and conversations forced activists to question their own position and understanding of different people within society. For example, during her return visits to Egypt, Dina had many of her preconceptions about different sections of Egyptian society (in this case, the people in the lower socio-economic groups) challenged by speaking “with anonymous people, you know like taxi-drivers…whenever I talk to these people I am extremely impressed” (Dina, March 2014).

As Bateson (1994) illustrates, difference - with people who have different perspectives and from experiences that place a person in a new situation, exposed to new experience — is an important learning process. The learning experiences generated during the occupation of Tahrir Square and at demonstrations during 25 January support theories of political socialisation that emphasise the pedagogical benefit of pluralist spaces (see Beaumont 2011). As the next section explores, diversity also generated opportunities for activists to learn by engaging in interactions that encouraged people to develop a position and point of view.

5.1.2 Learning by developing a point of view

While it was most common for activists to refer to the way they interacted with people that were different from them (most often suggesting that 25 January was ‘utopian’ because of the ways in which ‘different’ people came together), some activists show that difference does not necessarily mean having a different view - it can also mean having a more or less developed view. For example, Sana showed that knowledge, understanding
or commitment can deepen by conversing with (and learning from) those who have a similar perspective but whose experience and understanding is more developed than their own. Sana recounted her time at the sit-ins in Alexandria, reflecting on the discussions with prominent revolutionary socialists such as Mahinour el-Masry and Alaa Abd el-Fattah. She noted that, through these discussions, she learned about the systems they were challenging and how to develop her own “fighting talk” (Sana, August 2014), which she now applies in her important work within Egypt’s human rights movement. Such interactions are transformative for activists like Sana when they critically reflect on their prior assumptions and the assertions and views made by others in order validate meaning (Mezirow 1990). It also suggests that a more ‘assertive’ (Davies 2008) view of the world emerges because of the confidence gained by participating with others who help them to develop their perspective.

As the struggle continued, activists found they often entered into discussions with people who were unconvinced by the arguments presented to them. Activists gained new perspectives and solidified others. For example, Ali and Walid (both British-Egyptians, neither of whom had been activists before 25 January) learned by discussing their views with older family members who were wary of the protests. They had to justify why they wanted to participate in the demonstrations outside the embassy in London or go to Tahrir, and why they were voting a particular way (activist interviews, May 2014). The discussions with sceptical family members deepened their own understandings of particular events (in this case, the role of the army) and, as the struggle continued, their commitment to find out new information and then discuss this with family members lead Ali to believe he had even convinced his mother to change her vote in the 2014 presidential elections (Ali, May 2014).

Activists aligned to the same group often engaged in heated debates, at conferences demonstrations or online. For example, at events in London between May and November 2014, I observed activists debate and discuss hot topics such as: who was to blame for the massacre at Raba’a?; Who was to blame for the ‘counter-revolution’?; Whether Sisi represented a continuation of the Mubarak regime or if he was necessary for ‘stability and security’?; The root causes of Egypt’s struggle (geopolitics, US-Israel-Palestine, global capitalism…). Some also contested what should be the focus of future activism. To convince and challenge the other, activists would cite particular moments leading up
to or during the revolution, recount arguments made by specific figures or commentators, and make connections to wider geopolitical issues (particularly during the 2014 Israeli siege of Gaza). It was also notable that activists in the leftist/revolutionary camp debated intensely and often with a criticality that seemed to connect with the sense of blame. Amira notes that she is “still trying to work out where we failed” (April 2014), suggesting that many were searching to understand how Egypt had come to the position of the army being back in power and what they should do next. Although it may be problematic to determine a direct causal link between participating in social action and a changed perspective of the world (see Mansbridge 1985, Foley 1999), it is important to recognise that when activists engage in discussions that enable them to question the complexities of the struggle they suggest that it is through such processes that understandings shift and develop. They reveal the continuous nature of learning in struggle and demonstrate the limitations of conceptualising education and learning as something that is achieved; because people who participate in struggles continue to reflect and theorise their experiences, learning is, they illustrate, never complete or finished.

The reflections of many of the secular activists and ideas generated in the debates I observed, suggest that activism engenders learning through providing opportunities to have “more than one way of seeing” (Bateson 1999:53), both by gaining a different perspective from others and from wanting to provide those opportunities for others. For activists in the Egyptian struggle this means learning by questioning; from understanding that there can be a different perspective; and from respecting the “multiplicity of views” (Bateson 1999:53). However, although activists were exposed to people from various backgrounds and ideological positions at the sit-ins and demonstrations during the 18 days, this was not necessarily a learning experience for everyone. As Khaled reveals:

The discussions with the Islamists and the ideological things, I would say they were not serious but more a way of killing time, of doing something. Because of the long hours of staying in the square you have to talk about something. So when you find somebody with a beard you just...[laughs] actually one of my friends used to just say, ‘let's go hunting for a beard’ and you would tease him into having an argument just for the sake of
killing time and having fun. But most of the serious debates were trying to mobilise people to keep going. To stay resilient. (Khaled, March 2014).

Underlying Khaled’s comment is the suggestion that activists would talk with people from different ideological positions but participate and debate with people who had similar opinions: *talking with* and *critically engaging with* have clearly different pedagogical potential. This suggests that activists would learn through the overall process of contestation against the state but this process did not necessarily generate opportunities to learn through contestation with people who held vastly different opinions and ideas.

Khaled’s comments suggest that learning in struggle requires the activist to be receptive to engaging with people who might have a different point of view. These interactions might encourage them to think about their position, even if it results in them being more resolute in where they stand. If learning is about being open to a new perspective (Bateson 1994) then it cannot be assumed that just attending a demonstration alongside a diverse range of people is enough to be considered a learning process. Hall (2012:135) argues that, in order to make progress towards a specific goal, activists have to “listen to each other in a deep and respectful way”, an insight that reinforces the importance of understanding the ways in which critical thought and consciousness is developed within the context of a social movement. For instance, when Khaled - a secular activist - referred to conversations with Islamists as “killing time”, he suggests there was nothing he thought he might learn from the interaction. Such honest accounts suggest restraint must be exercised when exploring social movement learning. It cannot be assumed that diversity within a movement results in the same processes of learning for all activists because some individuals may be more receptive to learning from difference than others.

### 5.2 Individual and personal processes of learning

The assumptions that underpin beliefs are assessed through critical reflection (Mezirow 1990), a learning process that I will show is essential for activists to develop deeper understandings of social change. In this section, I show how activists reflect, make connections and embark on further enquiry, processes that can create new knowledge and
understandings of the world and how it should be. There are a number of elements of the “recursive process that Mezirow delineates for perspective transformation” (Baumgartner 2001:17): activists learn through a continuing process of observation, (critical) reflection, new or reinterpreted understandings that lead to new enquiries and further reflection and, importantly for critical learning, action (see Freire 1970, Allman 1999, 2001).

5.2.1 Learning by witnessing and observing

As well as learning through discussion, debate and ‘another way of seeing’ (Bateson 1994) activists begin a process of incidental learning (Schugurensky 2000a) by witnessing events that prompt new understandings and perspectives. Through what may actually be the culmination of several events (Taylor 2000), the process begins with a “triggering event or disorienting dilemma” (Baumgartner 2001:18) that leads the learner through processes of reflection to action. Activists observed many ‘triggering events’ in the Egyptian struggle, though the most commonly cited were the Tunisian revolution, the violence perpetrated during the 25 January revolution and the massacre at Raba’a in August 2013: the activists show that positive and negative events are both triggers for learning. Before looking more closely, it is important to note that these events in themselves were not necessarily enough to trigger a process of critical reflection at that moment: the reflection may happen in the days, weeks or months that followed.

As discussed earlier, activists’ learning was, for many, set in motion by witnessing President Ben Ali’s demise in Tunisia. Seeing people within the Arab world stand up to and overthrow an autocratic leader, they gained some sense of belief in the possibility of revolution. Witnessing a positive event triggered a hopeful imagination:

The idea of actually removing the president - people started to feel it can happen when Tunisia happened. It was kind of turning the idea from a romantic possibility to ‘why not?’(Khaled, March 2014).

However, despite the gradual shift from disbelief to possibility, this was not enough of a shift to mean that activists were discussing what they would do after Mubarak resigned:
What are we after? That is the problem. People were not discussing that. And this is why you can see the vacuum happening. The elitists probably did take the square and were kind of making all the fashionable manifestations of being anti-the Mubarak regime ‘blah blah blah’ but then they stop here. There was nothing after. They don't have ideas, they don't have plans. There is little chance that they can cooperate. And if anything they are competing. And I was hoping that through time and phase two through the realisation processes that people would readjust and kind of go through a learning curve but it wasn't happening, it was not happening at all (Dina, March 2014).

Therefore, while it is possible to learn from observing change happening elsewhere, witnessing alone is not enough to ensure the critical learning that will mean people develop a critical perspective on why they need to mobilise and how they might go about doing so.

For some activists who were already thinking critically about the events and the regime in Egypt, witnessing violent events generated the “complex cognitive and moral emotion” (Goodwin 2007: 418) that provoked Egyptians living in the UK to travel to Egypt and join demonstrators in Tahrir Square:

The 28th was the most decisive day… when I saw what happened on the 28th with so many police and people who were killed and so on, I decided to go immediately. I arrived on the 6th day during the first 18 days (Amira, April 2014).

Amira suggests that witnessing the violence towards protesters prompted a change in her perception of the regime and her own participation because she was confronted with an image that needed to be acted upon. Although the joy of Tunisia may have been inspirational, it did not necessarily conjure the necessity for action. A change in perspective generated a deeper understanding of the ways in which the regime enacted its oppression and a reflection of what she felt she should do. For Amira, observing the violence of the regime’s actions triggered an affective response that was strong enough to feel she had to get involved: reflection had lead to action. The difference between
reacting to hopeful or violent scenes suggests the nature of what is observed may be a factor to consider in theories of learning in movements.

During the 18 days, continued violent actions by the regime towards demonstrators such as the use of paid thugs on the streets of Cairo and the Battle of the Camel on 2nd February 2011 served to energise the activists’ resolve, as Nour shows: “I was subject to police brutality and that did change me. I was, like, more logically and emotionally invested” (Nour, March 2014). Emotions have been shown to “facilitate mobilization in authoritarian regimes through the transformation of fear into rage” (della Porta 2014: 33) but Nour shows how the regime’s actions triggered a rational (‘logical’) connection between the things he was witnessing to the things people had said about the regime: in other words, Nour had read and heard about the regime’s use of violence but during the 18 days he experienced it directly which - after thinking carefully about what he had seen in relation to his understanding - put the regime’s actions into reality.

Observing and experiencing violence (including the massacres at Raba’a) prompted activists to reflect upon what they saw and make connections between previous knowledge and the reality they had witnessed or experienced. For example, many anti-coup protesters highlighted the way in which the media in Egypt portrayed a different story of Raba’a to the one they had experienced (some, first hand):

We have so many channels on TV that just repeat the same things so that people just memorise and believe it. That if you say it enough you will believe any lie. And I believe this is what the media is doing in Egypt (Yusuf, March 2014).

Many within the anti-coup movement suggested, “the media would say a lot of things, to make the economy scream so people thought that they didn't want him, [Morsi]” (Salma, April 2014). The lived experience of participating in social action facilitates activists’ experience of discourse (Mezirow 1997) upon which some are prompted to reflect on their beliefs and understandings and, as a result, ask new questions. Sparked by the ‘disjuncture’ (Jarvis 2009) and the doubt they had between what they perceived to be the reality and the actual discourses around them, activists sought new information. The feeling of being unsure lead to processes of enquiry and theorising through which they
gained new understandings of the world, in particular how power was used to create discourse and ‘truths’.

Activists do not just learn by observing the actions of the state towards its ‘citizens’- they can also learn by observing how people within society respond to and treat each other. Some of the reflections of the 18 days and the 30June/3July revealed a stark contrast in the way people were treated and a tacit acceptance of oppression against certain groups. For example, 25 January “was the first time to hear please and thank you [in Egypt]” (Ahmad, August 2014) whereas the violent unrest following 30June/3July showed how “the people can turn into a mob and can become ugly” (Ayesha, March 2014) when violence is directed at the ‘other’. Perceived injustices against particular groups have “exposed a lot of people…but it [Raba’a] also revealed beautiful people” (Salma, August 2014) and lead to the formation of groups with specific identities as well as the disintegration of the ‘utopian’ sense of unity (of the 18 days).

Many more activists felt betrayed by the actions of activists who had campaigned for democracy but who supported the 30 June protests in 2013 that resulted in Morsi’s ousting. Salma, and others in the anti-coup movement, regarded 30 June as explicitly going against the democratic process and the people who attended as:

[These] two-faced people, you know, the people we trusted who we thought were revolutionary. To see them on 30 June and call it a revolution even though it’s an anti-revolution or counter-revolution in every sense of the word and they didn’t go back on that - that exposed them. And even if Egypt gets better one day, we will never trust them again (Salma, August 2014).

For Salma, and others, “post-the army interference, that’s when people started to think about what they want and what they stand for. That’s when opinions changed and people developed their own social groups” (Mona, October 2014). Whereas during 25 January, people with different allegiances came together, the support for the ‘coup’ by many activists (including secular and revolutionaries) divided those opposed to military rule. Anti-coup protesters, in particular, showed that their identification with a specific group was based on their understanding of the events of 30June/3July and their vision of social
change, but their understandings were also shaped by how they perceived the reactions they saw others display towards the massacre. Through observing, witnessing or experiencing acceptance, tolerance or oppression, some activists reflected on the way people treated each other and why. In doing so, they appear to have learned that social justice requires institutions that nurture respect for difference without oppression (Young 1990).

It is also possible to learn new skills, develop new perspectives and embark on new enquiries by observing other activists participate in a movement for change. Seeing the demonstrations garner strength during the 18 days prompted some to reflect on the reasons for the demonstrations and the possibility of change, also making them think about how they could be involved. A number of (now symbolic) moments and images were recounted during the interviews, such as the video of the lone man who stood in front of the water cannon “like in Tiananmen” (Faoud, August 2014) or the ‘blue bra girl’ being dragged away by police (various interviews 2014). These events made people realise the lengths the regime would go to stop the demonstrations. Furthermore, the juxtaposed images of violence and activists struggling for change meant many learned that there were people willing to stand up for others. The observations were felt by many within the UK and prompted them to act:

I thought, finally there is hope and the Egypt I have always dreamed of is changing. I thought I needed to be there. So I went to the Egyptian embassy for the whole 18 days, I decided I'm not doing my education any more because this is more important (Salma, April 2014).

Many activists recalled being inspired by observing the increased size of the demonstrations but recognising that some “started to maybe internally question ‘how do I not go because clearly their cause is correct?’” (Nour, March 2014). Nour suggests that witnessing the actions taken by activists prompted critical reflection of why others might be willing to risk their lives - what was it that that person knew that he did not?

Bateson (1999) shows that we learn in multiple ways as we ‘travel through life’, from observing and questioning our many experiences, and adapting and improvising in our interactions. She explores how, through observing social interactions, we come to know
about our world, understanding the expectations others have of our behaviour. In this continuing moment of revolutionary struggle, activists have observed kindness, acceptance and tolerance, as well as abuse of power, prejudice and oppression. Although learning in this way is incidental (Schugurensky 2000a) in that it is not intentional or structured, it is nevertheless meaningful and important; through observation, activists have witnessed abuse of power and oppression by the state and within Egyptian society and, through these processes of reflection, felt compelled to become part of the struggle. For many activists, incidental learning generated an intention to act that began with further enquiries and the search for new or deeper understandings. In this respect, incidental learning in struggle was integral to beginning the process of conscientization (Freire 1970).

5.2.2 Learning through self-directed enquiry in the search for new and deeper knowledge

Activists undertook many intentional activities of self-directed learning during social action. As a consequence of the discussions they had (and continue to have) with others, and the other processes of incidental learning, some activists were compelled to find out more in order to be able to develop their arguments and knowledge. They read more widely, searched for new information to develop their knowledge and understandings, and searched for facts to corroborate or dispel rumours associated with the struggle.

Knowledge is socially constructed: individuals or groups benefit from certain knowledge or truths (Kilgore 2001) and from placing restrictions on the sharing of information, as was the case in Egypt after the demonstrations in 2008 garnered support for Kefaya (Lerner 2010). In order for activists to understand how the world works - to come to understand and be able to resist structures of oppression and injustice - they seek out information and other knowledge: deeper, more nuanced or from alternative sources, as Faoud illustrates:

I remember during Morsi, I tried to go on and, instead of just saying stuff, would go on the ministry of finance website and look at the actual budgets - import-export expenditure, what comes into the state
etc - and so you try to put these in ways that get people to think about these types of numbers rather than just saying most of the stuff [is] because of the Brotherhood (Faoud, August 2014).

In searching out financial details during Morsi’s presidency, Faoud enacted a self-directed form of learning. Fact-finding enabled him to feel more confident in his own understanding of the situation (for example, that he was not just biased against Morsi or the Muslim Brotherhood), which then manifested in his continued participation. He recognised the importance of ‘knowing’ the facts and having the information to be able to “get people to think”. Activists also learned by seeking out information that they could use in conversation with family or friends, or when participating at events and demonstrations. For example, they searched to find evidence to support or refute certain claims about presidential candidates during the 2012 and 2014 elections.

Salma and Rana, both activists within the anti-coup movement, also participated in self-directed learning. They sought answers to conceptual questions specifically about military coups to support their own understanding and to use in their activism, for example, when talking to people at events and demonstrations, and in the media. Furthermore, three young female activists I met at an anti-coup demonstration talked about how, following the events of 30June/3July, they wanted to understand the whole situation more and, in their search for answers, they found themselves watching the film, ‘No’, about the Chilean resistance to Pinochet. They and other activists reported reading more widely after the ‘coup’, seeking information that might help them to understand the debates and conflicting narratives taking hold in news and social media (for a discussion of the contestation around the term ‘coup’ in the Egyptian case, see Underhill 2016a; Madr Masr 2013). Having already enquired into the definitions of dictatorship, Salma recalled this self-directed learning process, how she sought information about other examples of military coups, aiming to develop her own understanding of how the events were connected to broader issues such as the global political economy:

To be very frank, I did not know what the word coup was before the coup happened - I had never heard the word before but then I started reading more about the Chile coup and what happened there and the similarities, some of the things that happened exactly the way that the
media would say a lot of things to get people to believe what was happening and to make the economy scream (Salma, April 2014).

Engaging with and reflecting upon the global political economy prompted many to consider where and how particular discourses took hold, and start to engage with ideas that offer an alternative. Within the interviews and during conversations at demonstrations, it was common for activists to refer to different books or authors that they had been reading as a way to try and understand certain aspects of the revolution. For example, Ashraf (September 2014) talked about Kerry Bolton’s 2011 book, ‘Revolution from Above’, noting that learning about the relationship between Serbian activists and the Egyptian youth movement (see Squire and Gaydos 2013) helped him to understand how intelligence services and social media were able to manipulate and control particular discourses (see Bolton 2011). Similarly, Sana (August 2014) noted Gravonetter’s Theory, ‘Strength of Weak Ties’, as a tool that “help[ed] explain to me how we have worked the diffusion of information from Egypt to other places that happen through weak ties that are spread all over the world”. Like Ayesha who found herself “starting to read about anarchy” (April 2014), since becoming active in the revolutionary socialists, Sana also enquired more deeply into the ideologies underpinning the movement, acknowledging that, “first you start reading some papers, then you start agreeing with some, and then disagreeing…” (April 2014). Sana, like many who identify with the secular and Left, exemplifies how “engaging with oppositional discourses is a learning process” (Foley 1999:104, emphasis in original).

Through the process of self-directed enquiry, activists have read about theories and cases of dictatorship, revolutions, counter-revolutions and military coups, as well as mechanisms of social change such as constitutional reform and democratic processes. The activists’ “logical and emotional” investment (Nour, March 2014) in trying to understand the turbulent events has meant that many note having “[spent] almost every day throughout the three years reading new articles that made you think new things” (Faoud, August 2014). The implications of these learning processes are explored in Chapter Seven but it should be noted that individual enquiry through seemingly simple actions such as reading should not be overlooked as a process of self-directed learning within social action: asking questions and taking action is part of the continuing process of learning that offers the potential to build social change that can lead to progressive
social change. The next section explores the next stage of that process more deeply by examining how activists experience critical reflection.

5.3 Learning and unlearning through critical reflection

So far in this chapter, I have shown that activists learn through group interactions and personal, often individual, processes of reflection and enquiry. In this section, I look more specifically at critical reflection as a process of learning that happens through social action, individually and collectively. Critical reflection is an essential dimension of learning for progressive social change because it focuses attention on activists’ “formation of ideas” - how they come to their understandings of the various ways in which power and injustice persist (Chovanec 2009:94). In addition, critical reflection, as Freire suggests (1972), concerns the ability of human beings to reflect on their existence and imagine the impact they might have: critical consciousness shapes and determines how and why people participate in attempts to change the world as well as their perceptions of the impact they might have. I explore this second element of critical reflection in chapter seven when I focus on the implications of learning in struggle.

It is important to recognise that, at different times between 2011-2014, different people have come to interpret the revolution as a longer power struggle against the many manifestations of military rule. They also differ in the degree to which this understanding has developed. Indeed, for some, this understanding was not evident. Even those who were active opposing Mubarak and SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) prior to 25 January have come to new understandings as a result of reflecting on the events since 25 January and seeking new information about different aspects of Egypt’s social, economic and political development. Through observing the regime’s violent response to resistance and other ‘triggering events’ (Baumgartner 2001), activists reflected on particular moments, undertook new enquiries and gained new or deeper knowledge. Consequently, many understand that Egypt’s struggle centres on challenging the injustices created and perpetuated by the power of the SCAF because of the associated corruption, poverty, repression and social and political exclusion. How activists come to these critical understandings is the focus of this section.
Critical revolutionary praxis (Allman 2001) demands a specific kind of reflection (Chovanec 2009) where conditions and structures of power and dominance are examined and then acted upon (Freire 1970). This kind of reflection happens when activists make connections to “theoris[e] their experience: they stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values and choice. It is also clear that this critical learning is gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses” (Foley 1999:64). As well as highlighting the way activists framed their reflections through the theoretical and conceptual language of a socially just and emancipatory view of the world, Foley reinforces the Freirean notion of reflection leading to action. ‘Standing back’ from experience is an important aspect of critical reflection and learning for social justice for two reasons: first, because it enables people to see themselves within a context, thereby creating some understanding of their position in relation to others (essential to any project of progressive social change), and second because activists can examine, reflect upon, better understand and, subsequently, adapt their participation (essential for a critical revolutionary praxis (Allman 2001).

It was clear from this research (being based on the experiences of Egyptians living in the UK) that physical distance contributed to some activists’ ability to critically reflect. Hala illustrates that she was able to stand back and reflect since moving to the UK:

Being in the UK has been like being released from a cage. I can say and think things I never could in Egypt I am now free to have hope. Before I came to the UK I would not have been able to talk this way about this to my father. When I am away from Egypt I have much more political discussion but when I go back there I will have to keep it locked away. I will still be thinking it but I can’t speak it (Hala, March 2014).

Having the physical distance from her family enabled Hala to think and talk more freely. She was not alone in such revelations, as Mona’s recollection of a conversation with a family member in Egypt demonstrates:

[She said] ‘you don’t even live in Egypt so you have no problems – we can’t even get meat - you come here and you’ll know what’s going on’,  

121
I say that we’re outside so we can see things more clearly and we can still see what’s happening (Mona, November 2014).

Activists commented that the opportunity to talk about the struggle outside of a family or peer group was useful for their own understanding and their ability to come to terms with what has happened. They show that there are multiple spaces and actors that might generate reflection that could lead to action, and that learning is not limited to a particular moment. In addition, when specifically commenting that they felt able to reflect because they were not in Egypt illustrates that learning can happen through the process of ‘standing back’ (Bateson 1994; Foley 1999). In this case, they are able to reflect because they are away from the context.

Progressive theories of social change show that power structures that preserve and perpetuate injustice, oppression and exclusion must be challenged in order for social change to be equitable, fair and - ultimately - just. For individuals to be part of creating a socially just form of social change, there has to be greater understanding of different people’s individual and collective experiences of the world. In other words, it is necessary to stand back from our own experience in order to come to understand and respect difference (Young 1990) and see ourselves as part of a bigger and broader context than that which immediately concerns ourselves. Developing an understanding of the conditions and structures of your position in relation to others exposes power imbalances within society and is foundational for critically thinking about socially just ways to live. In line with Foley’s (1999) findings, activists in this study have theorised their experience of forming critical understandings of their position in relation to others, exploring and critically engaging using languages of social justice:

Issues around class were there but the revolution wasn't about class. It was about hope and dreaming for a different life, an improved situation, for the opportunity to see things change, because generally it hasn't, people were not getting better off, generally it was the middle class who were the catalyst of the revolution. Some were well off, who wanted to promote Egypt's general prosperity, some middle class who are aware of social injustice and are thinking that way about capitalism and
inequality. But bread freedom and social justice means different things to different people (Khaled, March 2014).

Khaled’s references to class illustrates the exploratory use of language that was common among activists in their reflections on the struggle: terms such as hope, equality and dignity regularly featured in the conversations, as did their antitheses: despair, inequality and humiliation. The activists used contrasting language that highlighted structural inequalities and oppression, suggesting that through critical reflection - they are participating in a struggle for progressive social change.

Ahmad, a member of the socialist movement in his youth but an active campaigner in the anti-coup movement, remarked (without prompting) that he learned through lived experience and through questioning. He learned that to create this change people need to understand what makes a society work for all people, not just those in power or those of a particular social or religious background:

I learn by experience… When I first came [to the UK], I would see a Jew and I would not talk to him but by the end I have to accept him, try to find the common ground, to value the concept of freedom. Value the concept of humanity, which is getting killed in this country after globalisation. To value is to ask questions and try to know. You should not be blamed because you want to know (Ahmad, August 2014).

When Ahmad tried “to find the common ground”, he suggested that, for social justice, people need to learn and find information (“to try to know”) that can enable them to challenge and resist the “divide and conquer” (Salma, May 2014) tactics employed by the military state. By critically reflecting on the discourses that divide and oppress, activists learned and became conscious of the structures that benefited from dividing opposition voices. This consciousness demonstrates that learning in social movements involves a process of unlearning dominance and oppression (Foley 1999). Unravelling state discourses requires the conscious and critical engagement with its content in order to seek new knowledge to build an alternative.

Observing and reflecting on the different responses to Raba’a prompted many (particularly within the anti-coup movement) to reflect on how people allow others to be
treated within a society, particularly as a result of discourses that create the ‘other’. For example, Adel travelled to Egypt to attend the sit-in at Raba’a to show his support for Morsi. He recalled the initial surprise that family members did not show concern about what might have happened to him or any anger towards the military or police for the number of people who lost their lives:

I have family who knew I was at Raba’a who didn’t even ask about me… I am not in the slightest bit upset about the family members who I have lost in this process because you can't be indifferent on a matter like this - you can't have that freedom because it is about death, death of people, it's about blood. You have to have an opinion when it comes to blood being spilled (Adel, May 2014).

Similarly, Ayesha explained how she felt about the way people treated each other in the aftermath of Raba’a:

Everybody was awful. Nobody had any respect for anybody else. Blood on all sides, to be honest. There were scenes when I felt that this was really [pause], there were scenes when they started hitting each other with stones and then feeling euphoric about seeing the blood of the Ikhwan, the blood of the secular activists, and everyone was using hate language. It's very alienating. I understand it, but I don't know how I can make my peace with it. It is very hard. I feel that my father would have been very disappointed (Ayesha, April 2014)

Some activists suggest that the response to Rab’a forced them to critically engage with the reasons why divisions became so intense in Egypt. They reflected on why people would respond to the deaths of upwards of 1000 people in one day with ‘indifference’ or even ‘euphoria’. Adel commented that Egyptians displayed “the lowest level of humanity, to be unable to identify with other human beings or feel their pain let alone their death” and that he felt “there were a lot of people rooting for the killing of people on the street” (Adel, May 2014). Like other Egyptians whose families were bitterly divided by the 2013 coup and Rab’a, Adel learned through a difficult and challenging
process of critical reflection. He experienced the discomforting recognition that his family had, because he had gone to Rab’a, also perceived him as the ‘other’.

Reflecting on the reactions to the coup and the massacre that followed, some activists suggested “the people” are the problem in Egypt because they have allowed the discourses of the ‘other’ to become so divisive some are also unwilling to acknowledge the social and economic “daily life problems” (Ahmad, August 2014) and the long and violent struggle for religious and political freedom (Mohammed, July 2014). Illustrating the complexities of such an emotionally charged and divided context, one anti-coup activist said, “we want a revolution from people’s hearts and brains” (Omar, October 2014). Amid the discussions about Raba’a were some uncritical, highly emotive and contextual arguments from both sides; but what these comments succeed in showing is that there is an important dimension of critical thinking within social movements: learning in struggle involves difficult, challenging and often emotionally painful processes of critical reflection that, as Omar Robert Hamilton illustrates, continue:

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 (Hamilton 2015:243)

5.4 Conclusions: learning and unlearning in social action

This chapter has shown that important processes of learning occur as individuals participate in the group context of social action. Participating in struggles for social change is a cumulative and continuing process, involving learning processes that enable activists to gain new or more developed knowledge and understandings of the world, and pedagogically productive and ‘discomforting’ (Bateson 1994) experiences.

Many of these learning processes occur because movements bring people from different backgrounds together. Being with people who have different or more developed perspectives enables activists to gain different or deeper understandings and leads to other learning processes. For instance, as well as reflecting on observations and
conversations, many activists build on group experiences by engaging in individual and personal self-directed learning to develop their understandings of the struggle and to be able to communicate their perspective to others more effectively. Activists experienced moments of ‘disjuncture’ (Jarvis 2008) that forced them to question their perspectives and break the habits associated with their old attitudes (Steinklamm 2012).

Activists showed that learning in struggle involves critically reflecting on the ways in which particular ideas of the world are created and circulated, and by ‘standing back’ (Foley 1999) to reflect on the situation and their experiences. These may be reflected upon in the moment but activists also continue to theorise with the passing of time and by gaining emotional distance. For example, the revolution involved events or interactions that were disorienting (Baumgartner 2001) and caused confusion (Youssef, Arafa and Kumar 2014) in the moment but activists continued to try to understand and reflect upon them in the months and years that followed, making connections by embarking on additional enquiries. They demonstrate the pedagogical potential of challenge and ‘discomfort’ (Bateson 1994), showing that, pedagogically, experiencing disorientation of having certain ‘truths’ challenged generates new learning processes. Although “logically and emotionally” (Nour, March 2014) challenging, activists undertook self-directed enquiries, such as asking new questions, interacting with different people or reading independently. These forms of engagement demonstrate that learning in social action encourages ‘theorising’ (Foley 1999) - critically engaging with and reinterpreting an interaction or event in order to make sense of it in relation to established and new ‘knowledge’.

Although Hall’s (2012) account of active listening in the Occupy movement illustrates valuable processes of learning by coming to agreement among the collective, warnings outlined by Mouffe (2005) and other post-political critiques about a consensus-based politics that silences difference must be heard. Many conversations between activists stagnated or perpetuated the same narratives and arguments, while others argued against including particular voices within the debate. On the other hand, I also witnessed moments that revealed the potential of learning in struggle where activists debated, questioned and pushed the boundaries of each other’s position. They accepted their disagreements and different understandings but some said the conversation made them want to find out more. These were the most critical, productive and, I would argue,
urgent conversations that I observed during the research period because they revealed social movements can create encounters where people have their positions challenged in ways that make them more critically engaged. These critical conversations also suggest a connection between alternative and radical conceptualisations of democracy and social change and the continuing process of learning in struggle. I build on this finding more in Chapter Six when I explore activism and changing conceptualisations of democracy.

To conclude, learning in social movements is continuous and cumulative. It involves learning processes that lead to new enquiries and through further enquiries, standing-back, theorising and critical reflection, connections are made that create new questions and perspectives. The learning continues: it is personal, individual, lifelong and lifewide. For instance, in 2016, almost five years after the tumultuous events in Tahrir Square, activists continue to critically reflect on what they understood as the real struggle, where they went wrong and how to move forward in a struggle of both reflection and action. As they engage in this reflection, they show that learning in struggle is a continuous process of change, for society and the activists themselves, and they gain new understandings and perspectives about the world around them. In the next chapter, I explore what activists learned. I focus on the content of the new understandings and perspectives. As I do so, I highlight another process of learning that is central to the overall thesis: unlearning.
CHAPTER SIX

LEARNING AND UNLEARNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

In fact, we were living democracy. We were implementing the main tools of democracy at that time... Some people say it was utopian, but really for a few days it was like this, believe it or not it was utopian. It was like this, a silent agreement between everyone that we wanted it this way... the people brought the best of their ideas, of themselves into this experience. So we were living this democracy (Amira, April 2014).

You can’t have a democratic process one day and then the next take it away and say everything can just carry on like it was. It’s not right (Abu Bakr, June 2014).

This chapter focuses on the second part of the research question: In what ways does learning in struggle shape activists’ understanding of social change? I look at what activists learned, showing that to different degrees, with differing emphasis and at different moments, many activists gained new or deeper knowledge, skills, insights and perspectives about Egypt and the world around them, the processes that shape the way the world is, and, as I explore in more detail in Chapter Seven, their role in creating social change. The specific contribution of this chapter is the interrogation of activists’ learning in relation to social change, exploring activists’ perspectives of how the world is and how it should be (Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015) and showing that participating in the Egyptian struggle developed, for many, their understandings of power.

Activists learn about and reflect upon ideas of politics and social justice, including reflections on the ‘distributive paradigm’ (Young 1990) and broader, more critical, approaches to social justice that highlight non-distributive dimensions of societal relations. Through the critical framework of social change, I uncover that activists learn about the “removal of institutionalised dominance and oppression” (Young 1990:15) and show that their understandings of concepts such as democracy have changed or developed through the course of the struggle.

Essentially, this chapter captures the normative framework of learning in struggle by detailing what activists learn about how the world works as well as their reflections on
how it should work. The implications of coming to particular understandings through participating are discussed in the following chapter by examining how activists’ participation has impacted their understanding of themselves as agents of change and their engagement with the continuing struggle and politics more broadly. The substantive focus of the chapter is the terrain of activists’ changing or developing consciousness. I examine what activists learn as a result of participating in demonstrations, movements, groups and action, and by reflecting on the events related to the struggle that have prompted Egyptians to ‘rethink everything’ (Baker 2016).

Activists changed and developed, reflected on the successes and failures since Mubarak’s resignation and came to their own understandings, showing that learning in struggle is not a linear process (Foley 1999). This chapter takes this further and advances the overall thesis that learning in struggle is a continuous and cumulative process of learning and unlearning about and for social change, and that this ongoing process is personal and complex. The chapter focuses on what activists learn, but there are times when it is necessary to provide additional information such as the process of learning.

6.1 Deepening understandings of power and discourse

I established in Chapter Two that dominant approaches to understanding social change derive from liberal theories of democracy that focus on the institutions and mechanisms through which power and resources are distributed. In this section, I show that, whether the activists first mobilised before, during or since the 25 January revolution, many have undoubtedly been ‘learning along the way’ (Bateson 1999).

Shifts, changes and developments in activists’ knowledge, understanding and perspectives about a range of topics raise questions about the kind of social change they and others call for and are underpinned by reflections on how the way the world works. Critical pedagogy, and in particular, the notion of conscientisation (Freire 1970), shows that creating social change requires activists to be conscious of their situation and the various injustices to begin to challenge them. Reflecting the dominance of the distributive paradigm within theories of social change and social justice, whether material resources or ‘positions of reward and prestige’ (Young 1990:18), activists in this
study reflected on poverty and inequality. As they offered their reflections, many revealed a deepening understanding of the many ways power can manifest as injustice. Learning is not limited to acquiring new knowledge but is also a deepening consciousness where there is a connection and recognition that their knowledge, ideas and perspectives have changed or developed.

6.1.1 “It is poverty and injustice”

Participating in the revolution and ongoing struggle created opportunities for learning about poverty. Activists in this study talked at length about the issue of poverty in Egypt, often to provide what they saw as important contextual background to the 25 January uprisings. In doing so, activists like Ahmad and Adel demonstrate a degree of pre-existing knowledge about Egypt’s social situation, the scale of poverty and reliance of the urban poor on informal housing:

The majority of people live in extreme, extreme poverty. A lot of people who are living in Cairo and Alexandria who have jobs that are living well below a dollar a day. Below the poverty line (Adel, May 2014).

They are concerned about the essentials. Four million people living in the graveyard8! (Ahmad, August 2014).

While activists often described the high levels of income poverty in Egypt, or explained that they were participating “to support Egyptian people to make a lot of improvements and to give them much better lifestyle and cross the poverty line” (Mohammed, August 2014), it was notable that many would take this further to reflect on how the distribution of economic resources reflected unequal power relations within Egypt and globally. For example, activists in the secular left and anti-coup movements reveal critical and reflective engagement with the underlying causes and various manifestations of poverty and injustice in Egypt when they argued that 25 January “was not a poverty revolution” (Zakaria, April 2014). By refuting the view that the revolution was about poverty,

8 Ahmad is referring to the area of Cairo where 500,000 people are estimated to have settled within the grounds of Cairo’s 7th Century cemetery: he notes ‘Four million people’, a statistic that has been refuted but that is commonly accepted among Egyptians (see http://archiveglobal.org/egypts-city-dead/).
Zakaria, and others, suggest they are learning about the complexities of the demonstrators’ demands for ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’. Poverty, although a significant issue, is understood as one dimension of a more complex struggle.

Although being cognisant of the scale of poverty in Egypt was important for many activists, learning that extreme levels of poverty are the manifestation of wider structural problems in Egypt, and therefore part of a broader struggle, raised more complex questions of power and injustice, as Ahmad illustrates:

> With proper democracy comes transparency; you don’t have corruption. When you don't have corruption, you have justice. You cannot make the poverty vanish, it is impossible, but poverty is associated with injustice and here is the problem with what is happening in the Middle East. It is poverty and injustice (Ahmad, August 2014).

The activists who identify with the secular/leftist and the anti-coup/Islamist groups demonstrate that they understand the struggle as being about issues far more complex than the distribution of wealth. Although they know income poverty is a huge problem in Egypt, they more often reflected on what they see as the underlying causes of poverty: challenges of corruption and elite power, the widespread and worsening (and often violent) repression, including within the media, and high levels of illiteracy. In making such connections between poverty and structures within Egyptian society, these activists show that learning for progressive social change involves reflections on the structural reasons why poverty and inequality remain such significant problems.

Much of the activists’ reflections on poverty and distribution of wealth focused specifically on the Egyptian context. However, participating in Egypt’s struggle (which has been reported by and reflected on by people within the media across the world and by politicians in the UK and US, for example) also prompted some new insights among Egyptian activists in relation to the global political economy. For instance, some activists continued to develop their ideas about poverty and inequality and reflected critically on the role of international institutions and powers such as the IMF whilst offering a broader critique of global capitalism. Faoud illustrated this as he continued to investigate and
come to understand “the whole system”. Secular and anti-coup activists learned about the intersections of politics and the economy, and Faoud suggests that he continues to learn and evolve as he participates in activism related to Egypt’s struggle:

I have more understanding of the whole thing about economy. We had no idea of what economy was all about. You start reading stuff about austerity versus having a stimulus plan, IMF, what does social justice actually mean and how to achieve it. So these are all questions that were triggered by the revolution and it was something we never thought about. Now it's coming to me! [laughs] One thing that really, something that I didn't know almost anything about is the economy, ideas about austerity, what the policy should be, what the government should use, and it's still in progress (Faoud, August 2014).

Faoud clearly demonstrates the significance of learning prompted by participating struggle and shows that he is experiencing a continuing process of learning and development. He states that he only had surface-level knowledge about the economy or the types of government policies that could impact people’s lives and notes that the revolution was the catalyst for self-directed educative enquiries that have helped him to understand the situation more clearly and deeply, and consequently have made him think differently about global institutions as well as those within Egypt.

6.1.2 “You didn’t realise how Egypt worked”

As activists questioned the reasons behind Egypt’s high rates of poverty, they raised the issue of elites in Egyptian society: the rich and wealthy whose connections to the ancien regime, in the long run, benefit from military rule. I should point out that for many (in particular the secular activists who had previously engaged in political opposition) this was not new learning; for example, they report being aware that there was an elite in Egypt that benefited from corrupt relationships and institutions. It is through engaging in the continuing struggle (in particular the return of SCAF) that their knowledge has deepened:
I mean even these pre-revolutionary years you might think that you knew a lot but after the revolution you discovered that there is a huge amount of things that you have no idea that they existed, how the country was run, the dynamics within the ruling elites and stuff (Faoud, August 2014).

Through asking questions, seeking new knowledge and making sense of the different perspectives, events and information, activists (gradually and at different times) learned about the structures - the ‘dynamics’ - that enabled some people within Egypt to gain and retain wealth and power at the expense of others in society. Essentially, they learned that “other people benefited from the military being in power” (Salma, March 2014). They learned that the SCAF and people connected to them were embedded throughout state institutions, controlled businesses, the media, the police and the judiciary, thereby controlling the people.

Even those who had been active in opposing military rule prior to 25 January gained a new or more critical understanding of the extent to which the SCAF dominated economic, social and political life in Egypt as they came to new understandings of the institutionalised systems of dominance that the military enforced and upheld:

Another thing I realise I learnt a lot about is the whole army thing. You didn't know, because there was no information or transparency, you didn't realise. I don't know how to explain this properly but you didn't actually realise how Egypt worked. After the revolution you realised that ‘oh my god, all this happened’. It was as if you are looking at a mystical forest. You don't know what is inside [laughs]. You know that it is corrupt, you know it is wrong, you know that Mubarak is an idiot but you don't know what's happening. You don't realise that there is actually a military and they have their own budgets and they owned a lot of stuff and the presidential palace has people that work inside and there is stuff happening. So sort of that stuff you start to realise more. I learned a great deal (Faoud, August 2014).
In this account, Faoud provides some of the details that emerged in other interviews and during participant observation. Activists knew military rule was problematic: for example, Nour mentioned noticing, when he was young, the change in political leaders in the US and UK but didn’t consciously connect this to the possibility that Mubarak would ever leave the presidency. What is interesting is that the discourse of the army in which it represents Egypt’s national pride and the saviour from colonialism and imperial interests concealed the extent to which SCAF could abuse the positions for their own material gain. Through participating and gaining knowledge about the financial activities of SCAF - for example, that they “are beneficiaries from Mubarak’s corruption. They deal in arms, They control 30% of the economy” (Heba, May 2014) - some activists have seen through or, to use Foley’s (1999) term, ‘unlearned’ this discourse and are gaining the knowledge through which to begin to express their grievances and mount an effective challenge.

Significantly, 25 January was an important period for many people to have certain pre-existing ideas challenged, specifically their pre-existing ideas about the state and the notion of the army as an institution that was working in the best interests of ‘the people’. For example, during 25 January, there was:

…more news everyday, more news that would come out of Egypt and everyone was pretty much stuck to the TV. More news about corruption would come up everyday and the news about the corruption hit my dad and my mum, they didn’t believe it was that bad so day-by-day they would think these guys are right, the people on the street are right and we need to stand with them, sort of thing. Day-by-day they would change their mind even more (Sami, September 2014).

This is further evidence of the importance of gaining information and knowledge for exposing corruption and, in the Egyptian case, for disrupting the securitised discourse of the army as a “mythical entity” that would never turn against ‘the people’ (Heba, May 2014). During the struggle, activists would discuss with friends and family what they knew and had heard, a process which reinforced and solidified their own understanding. The consequence for many was that:
We definitely see them in a different light than we did back in January 2011; certainly in February we were looking at the army as the institution that can basically do this for us, that could actually get rid of him [Mubarak] for us (Nour, March 2014).

For the majority of secular and Islamist activists, the discourse that the army would stand with the people at all times has been completely undermined. Learning about the abuse of power and control by a few over Egypt’s material resources enabled activists to create a clearer picture in their minds of what they were struggling for, and suggests that being cognisant of the ways in which particular people or institutions gained from certain systems and structures within Egypt is hugely important for creating progressive social change. Learning about power is, therefore, entwined with unlearning the discourses that preserve power within the elite and how these discourses materialise in the social world.

Not all who were active participants against Mubarak’s rule during the 18 days came to the same conclusion, however. Many nationalists support Sisi’s bid for the presidency in 2014 and justify their position through the language of ‘security and stability’. Nationalist arguments in favour of Sisi focus on wanting ‘to see the country is safe and to see people working, to see the economy growing” (Hany, May 2014). They argue the continued demonstrations and demands for change create unrest, invite terrorism and damage the economy. For nationalists, Sisi represents the ‘strong leader’ and a necessary “benevolent dictator” (Heba, May 2014) that is required to help Egypt recover and prevent it descending into war like in Syria or Libya (see Hany, Ashraf). Despite the violent oppression, continuing poverty and inequality, these types of comments were not uncommon in 2014, including among those who were in Tahrir or who mobilised within the student movement in the 1970s.

Underpinning the nationalist position is a strong attachment to the historicity of the 1952 revolution and the perception of the army as representatives of ‘the people’ who would never turn against them (Nour, March 2014). As Heba, Nour and others pointed out, because of compulsory conscription and the size of the military, most families in Egypt have someone who has spent time in the army and this influences their ability to be critically reflective of its actions. Even among my own social circle in Egypt, one friend
talked about being proud to represent Egypt and how it is seen among his friends and family as a sacrifice for the nation (personal correspondence). Indeed, opponents to military rule recognise that Egyptian society is entangled with the military:

It was very difficult for a lot of people to acknowledge that it is the army who are one of the factors of why we are where we are. Still, most people are in denial. Even among the activists they could not say yaskot yaskot hok mil ‘askr [Down Down with Military Rule] easily. There were so many debates to get them and then it was so easy for them to revert when they fell out with the Islamists and they went back to supporting the army (Ayesha, April 2014).

Another dimension of learning about corruption was as a consequence of observing and witnessing action taken by people in positions of authority. An important outcome of those learning processes was the realignment of the relationship between the state and citizens. As activists observed the bloody and violent crackdowns (whether online or in person), they came to understand the ways in which the state “exerts power over civil society” (Mann 1984:190, emphasis in original). Again, activists had been aware of the corruption of the police prior to the brutal murder of Khaled Said by police, the incident cited as triggering the 25 January uprising (Ghonim 2012), but it is the deepening of this knowledge that reveals the importance of learning in struggle:

On February 2 we had the infamous Battle of the Camel and I was 30 yards away from it, seeing people who were there being trampled and seeing police, disguised police officers waving their batons around. That changed everything for me and it was something I was physically seeing right in front of me and I didn't...I wasn't going to buy that this was just some random Egyptians who wanted the protests to stop. No, this was the police and this was done by the state. They may not have been police officers but they would certainly sent by the state for hire or whatever. So that changed me and that's when I thought no, we need to carry on (Nour, March 2014).
Learning that the state - specifically the military leadership of SCAF - would either endorse or tacitly approve violence against ‘the people’ (as seen with the camel battle and the blue bra girl incident, see Chapter Four, Section 4.2) was transformational for many Egyptians because it completely countered the nationalist discourse that had been embedded in the Egyptian psyche since the Free Officers lead the revolution in 1952. It was shocking and confusing (Youssef, Arafa and Kumar 2014) and forced them to question everything they had known to be ‘true’ about the relationship between the army and the people. This example of learning speaks directly to Foley’s (1999) conceptualisation of unlearning, whereby activists unlearn discourses of oppression. In this case, Egyptians had to, and indeed continue to, unlearn the historicised patriarchal discourses of the army as protectors, liberators and purveyors of freedom. A deeper understanding - a more personal and embedded knowledge - of police brutality and its connection to the military state strengthened the activists’ resolve to continue to participate in the struggle because they had learned the extent to which theirs was a struggle about power.

6.1.3 “If you say it enough, you believe any lie”

Activists reveal that they learned about the media as an institution. This institution, in Egypt, they realised, allowed SCAF to control and circulate specific discourses and representations related to the struggle and the activists who participated. Similar to a deeper understanding of the problems of the SCAF, activists report being aware of the lack of freedom within the Egyptian media but that, by observing and participating in the struggle, they gained evidence to corroborate their changing perspectives. For example, many came to understand the extent to which media was controlled by the SCAF through the rise and demise of political satirist, Bassem Youssef and his television show, Al Bernameg.9 Having gained popularity in 2011, Youssef was heavily criticised within the Egyptian media after turning his satire on Sisi, “even though it is the same way that everyone did of Morsi” (Heba, March 2014). For some, Bassem Youssef’s retreat from

---

9 Bassem Youssef is an Egyptian comedian who gained worldwide popularity and acclaim for his political and satirical television shows created in the aftermath of 25 January. After Morsi’s ousting in 2013, Youssef was reported to the General Prosecutor’s Office for ‘disrespecting the armed forces’ and for making reference to the ‘coup’. In June 2014 he stopped broadcasting, citing the dangerous political conditions (Kingsley 2014).
Egypt’s public sphere highlighted the extent to which the Egyptian media had, once again, been co-opted and controlled by particular powerful forces within the state, namely SCAF:

Bassem Youssef has even stopped because he may influence. But if you can't have a satirical show then what? If you can't handle a comedian and you can't form your own views? (Walid, May 2014).

Importantly, Walid - and many others like him - show that the controversy around Bassem Youssef did not just prompt reflections on the weakness of Egyptian media institutions in relation to the power of the SCAF. They also learned about the importance of a free and open media to enable people to think for themselves, and became more aware that many within Egypt continue to be persuaded by the media and unable to think for themselves:

We speak to family members and so many of the times they have very odd views but it is just because how the media influences people - it influences people a lot [emphasis] over there and the media has the power to talk crap about anybody and just destroy their credibility completely. People believe that, they don't…They never question or think why are they lying. They say, “why are they lying? It is the media, they must be great!” (Ali, May 2014).

Again, this might not be new knowledge but it is a deeper knowledge because activists had observed the state endorsed media control and manipulate ideas, knowledge, narratives and representations. Activists now had a concrete example of the way in which the state controlled discourse. For many activists, having examples like that of Bassem Youssef made them more convinced of their understanding that state controlled media acts as a tool to create and disseminate narratives that serve the SCAF and silence critical or questioning voices.

When activists reflect upon the media reports in the aftermath of 30June/3July, they demonstrate that learning in struggle involves learning to critique. Having developed skills through participating in and reflecting on events between 2011 and 2013, activists
suggest they were already prepared to critically reflect upon how the state-endorsed media was able to “divide and conquer” (Salma, May 2014) by controlling the rhetoric and creating fear of the ‘other’ (for example, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi, terrorist, foreigner, activist...). Some activists also learned to connect the proliferation of these specific ‘othering’ discourses to the actions of other state institutions. They learned to question how discourses circulate, reinforce and legitimise the judiciary’s actions that enabled detention and imprisonment (often without charge), death sentences for activists and impunity for police officers who had been witnessed committing violent assaults:

One of the things we lack in Egypt is that we have so many channels on TV that just repeat the same things so that people just memorise and believe it. That if you say it enough, you will believe any lie. And I believe this is what the media is doing in Egypt (Yusuf, March 2014).

Reflecting on relations of power generates learning about the institutional mechanisms through which the military regime is able to retain its power and restrict avenues for democratic processes and forms of social change. Activists have learned that democracy, in both the top-down and bottom-up senses, has been restricted by the state as it controls civil society at the top and excludes action from below. Through reflection, critique and learning about power as situated within discourses that divide, some activists are unlearning the discourses that the state uses to control and oppress.

6.2 Institutions and instruments of democracy

Approximately half of my interviews took place in the lead up to the 2014 presidential election, the other half in the aftermath. Because of the nature of the Egyptian struggle (involving revolution and counter-revolution, constitutional reform, elections, a military coup) and the dominant representation of the revolution as a struggle for democracy (see della Porta 2014; Grand 2014; Gunning and Baron 2014), a significant portion of the activists’ reflections concerned procedural and institutional dimensions of state-society relations such as the role and practices of the judiciary and liberal democracy, and wider conceptions of participation within democratic processes.
6.2.1 “That’s why it’s a dictatorship and that’s what democracy is about”

Many of the activists perceive the revolution and continuing struggle as, at its core, a struggle for a realignment of state-society relations in Egypt, with regards to the distribution of material wealth and resources, and various dimensions of power (see Shenker 2016; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014). Activists reflected on distributive and liberalised elements of social change, in particular the way elites are able to dominate through networks of power that control institutions such as the judiciary and media, and to retain wealth and resources. For some, these were explicitly referred to as being connected to how they understood democracy.

One of the outcomes of learning in struggle relates to deepening knowledge and developing skills in explaining terminology to others. For example, some activists have learned the meanings and interpretations of terms associated with politics. Salma was active in discussions online and at demonstrations throughout the 18 days and became heavily involved in the anti-coup movement after 30June/3July. She illustrates how the events in Egypt prompted her to learn about specific terminology and institutions, in her case the specific term ‘dictatorship’ and how it related to the different locations of institutional power:

After 25 of January revolution I started to read, and even on Facebook and Twitter people were putting their opinions. People were talking more openly about what politics was about: powers, the three powers: the constitutional, executive and judiciary. I didn't know about these three powers and how they had to be separate or that in Egypt all three were connected and one person was dealing with all three of them and that's why it is a dictatorship and what democracy was about (Salma, May 2014).

When Salma explores the three types of power, she reveals a critical engagement with the details of instrumental processes of politics and governance, and suggests she learned about some of the specific distinctions between democracy and dictatorship. In particular, she recognised that different institutions that govern state-society relations should be kept distinct but that in Egypt, one person, Mubarak, had control over them all. Seeking
understanding of such technicalities of governance - in this case the difference between making the rules (constitutional) and enforcing them (executive) - shows activists have become deeply engaged with political processes and institutions. Similarly, Adel reflected upon the 2014 presidential election:

In my heart I knew there was only going to be one outcome because you need five things to take control of the country: the military, the Interior Ministry, the big business, the media and the judiciary (Adel, May 2014).

Activists have developed their understanding of the institutions and how they are connected, and the terminology associated with different manifestations of state-society relations: in this case the terms, dictatorship and democracy. They have learned that the judiciary is an important institution through which dictatorships can be established or sustained. More specifically, by observing and participating in the struggle, through discussions and gaining new knowledge, some activists have learned that, for social justice, legal institutions must be impartial and sit away from any political influence. They learned that every person should be treated equally in the eyes of the law. As Ahmad noted, “[Social justice] is just an idea - we have to establish first legal justice that we are all equal when it comes to the law” (August 2014) and Faoud explained in more depth:

Another thing that was very interesting but that came recently was part of how naive we were, that we felt that in order to solve our problems we needed an independent judiciary system. But that is not the only problem, we have more profound problems. The performance of the judges and how they are appointed and even when they are independent how they are appointed, their nephews, their kids, the quality of the judges are very poor. So I started to realise how complex the problems are (Faoud, August 2014)

Once again, it is evident that there is a difference between having gained new knowledge and developing a deeper understanding of pre-existing knowledge. Through deeper insights, activists are able to question and interrogate underlying structures of power in
Egypt. For example, Faoud reflected on his own naivety (a further illustration of the process of critical reflection within social movement learning) about the judiciary. Faoud demonstrates that, through the revolution and the steps he has taken to learn more, he has learned that the problem of the judiciary is not just about it being independent from other state institutions. He now realises that there are bigger issues that create the problem of an uncritical, compliant and weak judiciary, such as the corruption within the system that enables people (elites and people with connections to SCAF) to gain positions without being adequately qualified, and that this leads to further ineffectiveness. Faoud, and others, also allude to learning about broader societal issues such as poor education that then impacts the poor quality of available judges within the system.

Activists reflected on the notion of rule of law from two different perspectives and, in doing so, reveal understandings of democracy that are dominated by the liberalist position. The first relates to the existence of state institutions that are used to enforce the law (such as the judiciary and police) and the other concerns the relations between those living in a society. More specifically, anti-coup activists commented on the treatment of demonstrators by the police and the state’s legal institutions, and on the way that many people within Egyptian society acted outside the law in the violence that followed the massacre at Raba’a:

I felt my brain was opening up to the idea of democracy. Before the revolution I didn't actually think of it. I always thought of the people being a little bit backwards [laughs]. I thought, Egyptians, they don't know how to live normally a lot of the times, they can act in ways that are a little bit backwards. But I realised it was not the idea of democracy, it is the idea of law, respecting the law that got you here and that is what is missing in Egypt (Salma, March 2014).

Salma suggests that, during the violent unrest post-30June/3July, people did not act according to the law because they had lost respect for it. Having witnessed the illegal treatment of demonstrators and activists by police, and of the disintegration of respect for the law by Egyptians who took to the streets, Salma suggested that democracy, to her, was now more entwined with the idea of reciprocity. In other words, Salma learned to
view democracy as rooted in the reciprocal relationship between the state and its citizens where each would follow the rule of law.

As Salma illustrates, by observing the actions of the police and hired thugs, and the civil unrest and violence in 2013, many activists questioned their own understanding of state-society relations in Egypt, and of the way people within a society behaved. Theorising this more deeply, Ayesha explained how the apparent support among some elements of Egyptian society for the massacre at Raba’a developed her understanding of a significant element of liberal democratic theory - Hobbes’ notion of a social contract:

My faith and belief in the people was also tested when I saw the possibility of the mob mentality, the negativity and the disintegration not of law but basic human values, and I thought now I understand Hobbes more! [laughs] For the first time, maybe I understand social contract better than any time ever (Ayesha, April 2014).

This is particularly interesting; Ayesha is a secularist who displays the Raba’a symbol on her Facebook profile to show sympathy with the position of anti-coup protesters. After doing so, and similar to the experience of many other activists, her family became extremely divided and relationships have either broken down completely or become very tense. For Ayesha, the post-30June/3July violence and the apparent joy that some in Egyptian society displayed in response to the massacre at Raba’a revealed a breakdown in the social contract. Ayesha suggests that the summer of 2013 degenerated into the ‘State of Nature’ that Hobbes warned about. As she reflected on this period, she understood the importance of a social contract that was upheld by every individual to ensure the safety of everyone in the society, and that the state had to respond when the rule of law failed to get people to act appropriately. However, her laugh also suggests she was surprised and frustrated that people believed the securitisation narrative: that the army is needed in order to control the people and bring stability.

In numerous conversations with Sisi’s supporters outside the embassy during the presidential elections in 2014, the nationalists were almost universal in the way they invoked the narrative of stability and security in reflecting on their understandings of democracy - what it is and should be:
To see a country is safe and to see people working, to see the economy growing, that is the meaning of democracy to me. When the people at the top are doing everything to make that happen, that is more important, that is democracy. I can say that I want to be safe, and my family to be safe, to be secure in my own flat when nobody comes to take me away in the middle of the night. That’s democracy! (Hany, May 2014).

Hany’s comments were characteristic of the nationalist position during 2014; at the time of being interviewed, Hany was reflecting on Sisi as a presidential candidate not his actions as president. At this point, it was Adly Mansour, interim president, not Sisi that had been ‘at the top’ and sanctioned the disappearance of hundreds of Egyptian citizens and journalists in “the middle of the night”.

The central thesis put forward by nationalists is that Egypt needs the army to protect them against terrorism, which will subsequently enable economic growth. In doing so, they reveal the ‘stability-security’ impasse. This impasse forecloses critiques of the army that, as the secular and anti-coup activists show, can develop understandings of the connection between economic growth and other aspects of social change. Even people whose family members are actively involved in challenging the role of the military have not learned that they are still dictated to by a securitisation discourse that enabled Mubarak to enforce a 30-year state of emergency. Ashraf, for example, emphasised the centrality of security to developing the economy:

It is my view the first priority to re-establish security of the state and secondly build the economy – without these two things then nothing will happen. If there is no security you cannot build the economy and if there is no economy you cannot be able to achieve social justice so it is accepting really the gradual process of change which may take time (Ashraf, September 2014).

This supports Foley’s (1999:4) argument that “the unlearning of dominant, oppressive ideology and discourses and the learning of oppositional, liberatory ones are central to processes of emancipatory action.” Comments like Ashraf’s suggest that, in line with
Antonacopolou (2009), unlearning may be a precursor to learning: there are some things that cannot be learned without first experiencing unlearning. However, in this case, the impasse is perpetuated because the conditions prevent some from unlearning. For those who remain fixed on the idea that the army are the ones to save Egypt, they have yet to unlearn that SCAF survives through oppression and domination, politically, economically and socially.

Islamist and secular activists often mocked the militarised and security-centred approach of the nationalist discourse and argued that nationalists were “state freaks” (Khaled, March 2014) who had been blinded by the dominance of a discourse of fear, terrorism and state security. Many activists in these groups were, from the beginning of the 25 January revolution, against military rule but they have learned how to articulate this in relation to this discourse, arguing that “the problem is they [the military] should not be in power because they can only think of protection and security” (Zakaria, April 2014). Walid explains this in more depth, showing that, through the elections, he has learned that SCAF lack the expertise to govern:

Even prior to January 25 I thought about the army but once you start reading a bit more and you start to understand more you understand the army is there to protect. They are a state institution for the protection of the people and they should be not mixed with politics…I am not saying the army is bad, no the army is fine but you are there to protect the people. That's why the army is there. The interviews with Sisi [whispers], I am not too persuaded. I mean the man has been in the army all his life, he doesn't really have any background. And then people will come out with comments like ‘Oh, Nasser, he was in the army and he turned out to be great!’ But every area is different and every time is different and I just don't see him having a plan. I don't. You look at his financial plans, you look at his social plans. There has to be social reform before anything (Walid, May 2014).

Walid shows that deeper reflection on Sisi as a presidential candidate also involved a broader reflection on the role of the army and military in governing Egypt. This leads to a more critical understanding that, as a state institution, the military’s purpose lies in
protection not politics. In a context where the national identity has been constructed around the military (see Chapter Four), this is hugely significant. Furthermore, Walid felt the need to whisper when he spoke critically about Sisi. This reveals that, while he was critical of Sisi’s supporters, there is an element of fear of being too critical. He was clearly cognisant of the reality of power in the Egyptian situation, and how it even manifested at the embassy in London, substantiating a study by Fawzy (2012) where a negative relationship between Egyptians in the UK and embassy staff was noted.

Secular and Islamist activists often commented that the nationalists did not look at Sisi’s plans and did not think critically about his credentials as anything beyond a military leader and a “strong man” (participant observations, May 2014). Within these claims, secular and anti-coup activists suggest nationalists have not learned about the way power works in Egypt, or the ways in which power is created and embedded within discourse. The idea that there are some people who have not learned raises important questions for further investigation: it is important to understand what kind of learning is required for progressive social change, and where and how that learning happens. I explore these questions in Chapter Eight.

6.2.2 “Take him out by the ballot box”

Since 2011, Egyptians have experienced two presidential elections, referendums for constitutional reform, parliamentary elections, a proliferation of political parties in the aftermath of 25 January followed by an increasingly prohibitive clamp-down on political space. Because the interviews were conducted with people who were engaged in Egypt’s social and political struggle, all of the activists reflected on the various administrative and procedural dimensions of democracy that took place within this context. They often talked at length about Egypt’s political history and debated the successes and failures of former leaders such as Nasser and Sadat; many explored the turbulent issues of political leaders, parties and institutions, and broader debates of governance, policies and programmes. As they participated in these discussions and reflections, activists have created new understandings of democracy, learning to reject ‘end-point’ liberal democracy (Grugel and Bishop 2014) in favour of theories of democracy that examine the space for debate, discussion and deliberation.
Many activists experienced significant shifts in their understanding of institutional and procedural aspects of democracy by participating in particular democratic processes for the first time in the period between Mubarak’s resignation in February 2011 and the removal of Morsi in June/July 2013. For example, Salma recalled:

My first time ever to read the constitution was the Egyptian one. I don't think I have ever sat down and read one. I don't see myself understanding all these things but in the first Egyptian constitution I actually read everything and followed the whole six-month process, watching videos, and I was critical and reading all of the different things that was being put in the constitution. Because they had this thing for expats to write down what they think and I was sending in my opinion (May 2014).

Through the process of engaging in elections, campaigns and referendums, activists learned about democracy. Practically, they disseminated the constitution online (predominantly on Facebook) and held lectures and events for Egyptians living in the UK to learn about the presidential candidates in 2012. Some also reported travelling to Egypt during voting periods specifically to debate the decision with friends, family, maids and drivers or to influence them to vote a particular way (see Ahmad, Heba, Rana). As illustrated above, by participating in creating a constitution, Salma sought new knowledge, reflected on the content and implications of the constitution, and discussed her thoughts with family and friends. Not only did she learn about the content of the constitution, she learned about the importance of participatory processes when constitutions are created. Participating in the institutional and procedural dimensions of democracy in these ways - actively discussing and debating votes and policies - challenged activists’ perspectives of democracy. They learned about broader democratic principles that focus on the processes rather than the outcome, alluding to participatory and deliberative approaches to democracy. For example, although they may have engaged in procedures of ‘ballot-box’ or ‘end-point’ democracy, and they had campaigned for elections and the opportunity to vote, they learned that democracy was also about being able to debate and to engage in democratic conversation and enquiry.
Activists showed that they were learning about what democracy is and could be, reinterpreting it as they reflected on and justified their attitudes towards particular moments in the struggle. For example, they often explored their engagement with formalised democratic processes by sharing their reasoning for voting a certain way in referendums and elections, or for boycotting (for further discussion, see Chapter Seven, Section 7.3.2). As they did so, they would connect their discussions of voting to how they conceptualised democracy and reveal wider understandings of the struggle in Egypt, as Ayesha (secular but sympathetic to the anti-coup position) illustrates when she talked about the 2012 election:

I boycotted the Morsi-Shafiq elections and after, of course, the referendums or whatever they are. This is not democracy. There was a nascent democracy and I felt that Morsi was a legitimate president but I was not overwhelmed by him (Ayesha, April 2014).

Like many who opposed the military, during the various procedural dimensions of democracy, Ayesha carefully considered whether to boycott or participate in the referendums and elections, and learned about democracy through the process. Similarly, Ahmad highlighted the kinds of discussions people had in the run up to elections and the way the term democracy was understood and invoked. An Egyptian who had been active in the youth wing of the socialist movement but who, following 30June/3July, supported the anti-coup position, Ahmad reflected on his initial plan to boycott the Morsi-Shafiq election and recalled how his daughter convinced him to participate:

I phoned a friend of mine and we talked and I was totally against Morsi. We had a week to vote here and my daughter was 16, she said to me do you care about the revolution? I said yes. She said “Don't be selfish. You are contradicting yourself. Either you are with the revolution or you are against the revolution. This is not a normal election and you don't have the option of boycotting, this is not a luxury. It is a matter of life or death. If Shafiq comes then everything is finished.” She said to me exactly this: “If Morsi comes then all the Christians are against him, and all the entire region against him, all the Americans are against him but they don't declare it because it is against their principles. So if he
manages to succeed he is going to succeed on the edge of 52 or 53%. We have democracy now and we can get rid of him next time. But first let's clean ourselves.” And in five minutes she convinced me and I voted on the last day (Ahmad, August 2014).

Activists appear to have learned to reject liberal democracy that reifies elections and ‘end-points’ and many argue, like Ayesha, that voting is ‘not democracy’. However, activists within the anti-coup movement also suggested Morsi’s win in 2012 signified a step towards ‘legitimate’ democracy. For example, Ahmad voted in 2012 thinking the newly installed democratic processes would enable Egyptians to reject the SCAF then and “get rid of him [Morsi] next time”. However, they also emphasised the importance of the process - being able to participate in an election where the outcome was not completely predictable. Activists suggest participating in the struggle has taught them democracy is a delicate balance of process and outcome; elections are important but liberal democracy is too narrow and does not ensure equal (or meaningful) participation in debate and discussion. The actions taken by the activists - the discussions, debates and reflections during elections - are important processes of learning that encouraged them to reconceptualise democracy.

The question of legitimacy based on democratic electoral processes is central to the anti-coup position, arguably because their grievances against the SCAF and the detention of Morsi rest on the notion that the ‘coup’ “was a conspiracy against the legitimacy, against the democracy” (Mohammed, August 2014). As Abu Bakr argues, “it’s about democracy and democratic rights. Once you have taken away the legitimacy... and they have taken away the legitimacy” (June 2014). Such positions may explain why anti-coup activists were more likely to invoke ‘ballot-box’ understandings of democracy than the secular or nationalists: “If Morsi was taken out today then the next president will be also and we’ll be back to the start with the next 60 years… If you don’t like him take him out by the ballot box” (Sami, September 2014). Sami summarised a common argument presented by those in the anti-coup movement: that the 25 January revolution was a struggle for democracy and the events of 30June/3July undid the progress that had been achieved: “You can’t have a democratic process one day and then the next take it away and say everything can just carry on like it was. It’s not right” (Abu Bakr, June 2014).
Although it has been noted that the timing and organisation of the elections prevented some groups such as the revolutionaries from mounting an effective bid during 2012 (see Achcar 2016), it was very common for activists to regard the Morsi-Shafiq election as reflecting the essence of democracy. Activists recounted conversations with friends and family, and many travelled to Egypt to discuss which way to vote and to be more closely connected to the debate. They argued that:

Democracy gives the opportunity for the average person to be somewhat in control of their future. And that's what democracy means to me - for the person to feel that this is my country and I have the right to have my opinion (Adel, May 2014).

Learning about democracy also involves reflecting on how it manifests within global institutions. Activists illustrated their despondency with the notion of democracy by arguing that, because global powers such as the US and UK did not condemn the coup or Morsi’s imprisonment and subsequently endorsed Sisi's presidency, democracy is actually a “façade” (Rana, September 2014); “the West are against democracy in our region” (Hany, May 2014). Adel elaborates:

For me, it reaffirms my belief that there is no such thing as democracy anywhere. Watching the West back Sisi, even after the massacres and the atrocities and the human rights and the Amnesty International report. The list is endless and not a peep out of David Cameron, not a peep out of Obama. For me, there is one thing that is important and it is for Western people to see the farce face-to-face... I hope that those who did not see before now see it clearly. That's the only advantage that has come out of this. Maybe a few people will see what a farce it is... for this generation this is the moment of proof to show that they cannot claim they could not see it. [The] defining moment of truth where you can either stand up for the values or not, but you can't say that democracy is democracy and at this stage they voted for the MB but it is unfortunate because these are the kinds of people that cannot have democracy. We either stick with our values or not. We cannot just give up on our values because they don't make sense at this stage.
If you have a value it's got to be a right value and you've got to stick to it (Adel, May 2014).

Many in the anti-coup movement like Adel emphasise a normative, “thick” (Gandin and Apple 2002) perspective of democracy: they have learned that democracy should be inclusive, allowing all voices and positions to be heard. By reflecting on the responses of ‘liberal democracies’ like the UK and US, many activists (predominantly anti-coup but also some secular youth) echoed political theorists who exposed the disparity between the rhetoric of democracy and its material reality (Dunn 1979; Beetham 1992; Shapiro 2003). Activists argued that, in reality, democracy does not exist anywhere because certain voices (in this case, and from their understanding, the Muslim Brotherhood) are silenced.

As the dust settled on the events of 2013, many secular activists reflected on the extent to which the outcome of the 2012 election between Morsi and Shafiq had been predictable. Many suggested they had been naive to think the balance of power had shifted away from the SCAF so significantly. As they make such observations, they show they are continuing to learn and critically examine their own actions during, and reactions to, elections:

I was thankful that it was not Shafiq and I was wrong. It should have been Shafiq. He would have brought things to the real confrontation. Bringing Morsi and the Ikhwan into the picture, they were encouraged to go into this to give the ancien regime and the SCAF an excuse for coming back. It was obvious (Ayesha, April 2014).

Ayesha’s evaluation suggests that, if Shafiq had won, the momentum of anti-SCAF feeling would have exposed the injustices that the SCAF presided over. Instead, by winning at a time when the SCAF was still powerful, Morsi had walked into a trap that diverted attention away from the ancien regime towards the inevitable fear of the Brotherhood. Within this comment, Ayesha reveals important learning about a very specific dimension of Egypt’s struggle - that it was essentially a struggle for constructing and controlling the narrative, the second face of power, according to Lukes (1974). This required learning that “the big elephant in the room in every conversation about Egypt is
the army” (Nour, March 2014). For the activists who recognise that they had been “outsmarted by the regime” (Ayesha, April 2014), they show learning in struggle is about power and how it resides within discourses that are used to oppress.

Some activists were reflecting on the invisible and coercive faces of power, understanding that certain ideas had been established as ‘truth’ and that these were presenting significant challenge for moving forward. The Egyptian case demonstrates that education for and about democracy must engender critical thinking and reflection on power relations, particularly how power manifests in the structures and processes that engender, enable and perpetuate marginalisation and oppression within society.

6.3 Learning democratic alternatives

One of the ways activists learned was through engaging in processes associated with democracy such as debates about referenda, the constitution and elections. They reflected on these processes and revealed how their experiences had impacted their understandings of how decisions related to social change are made. Building on many activists’ critique of institutionalised and structural forms of democracy, this section shows that some activists have reinterpreted democracy as concerning how we live together. They reflect on aspects of decision-making, foundational elements of social justice (see Young 1990, Foley 1999) and a progressive form of social change. In this section, I show that activists have expanded their view of democracy, learning that liberal democracy is too narrow in its reach: instead of being conceptualised through institutions that can be implemented, democracy also concerns how people live together and treat each other.

6.3.1 “We need hundreds of years to teach the meaning of democracy”

Substantiating the conclusions of Cochran’s (2008) comprehensive study of Egyptian education policy, some activists suggested that the Egyptian military regime retains its hold over the Egyptian people because Egypt’s education system prevents critical thought or questioning of what the military does or the role it should have in a free society. For these activists, the poor standard of school education has created an unthinking population that is unable to question the regime:
It’s weird, why would someone in their right mind go out and give a green light which meant that the army are back into power? Until this day we don’t really understand it and obviously when you think about it you can find the reasons. It’s education. Clearly. Not university education, that’s clear. We mean real, free, liberating education, which I don’t think the system in Egypt provides. When people don’t understand that the military objective is only to defend the country on external issues, interior when it has to. When you think it’s great that they are making cakes and building motorways or bridges, you realise that the people don’t understand how things should be run. To then understand that he might be educated but the education they have is not what they need. That is where we are (Omar, October 2014).

Omar demonstrates the inextricable link between democracy and education (Dewey 1916, 1937). He suggests that the regime retains its position because the approach to education in Egypt has resulted in a population unable to reflect on what the role of a military should be, and what it is in Egypt. Underlying these comments is Omar’s recognition of a key failing within the nationalist position: a lack of understanding of how the military regime has constructed the many social, economic and political problems Egypt faces.

According to those who oppose military rule, it is essential to expose the injustices perpetuated by SCAF, including against people within the army, and that their power is secured by the wider injustices such as “40% illiteracy and 50% extreme poverty” (Rana, March 2014). However, it was interesting that some of the activists who identified with the secular position also sympathised with the nationalist perspective and were sympathetic towards Sisi in 2014. These people cited being ‘pragmatic’ about the prospects for democracy and social justice, arguing that they knew the situation was dire but that it was impossible for Egypt to move forward without a strong military leader like Sisi. In doing so, they revealed positions that speak to discourses of Middle-East exceptionalism (see Bayat 2010; Salamey 2009, 2015): in other words, that democracy in the Middle-East is impossible.
During many of the conversations with those sympathetic to, or outwardly supportive of, Sisi’s campaign for the presidency, activists suggest that the “pragmatic” position (Rana, March 2014) is to accept that Egypt needs a ‘dictatorship democracy’ or a ‘just’ or “benevolent dictator” (see Hany, Rana, Heba, Ashraf, participant observation). One Sisi supporter explained his reasoning:

All the third world countries need a dictator. They can't have like Europe. No way. It does not work. Because our people do not have an idea of what democracy means. They think it means that you can park double and triple across the street, they think it means I can walk and no one can talk to me and that is because it is democracy and I am free, no. Not one year of democracy, it won't work. It won't work. We need hundreds of years to teach people for the meaning of democracy (Hany, May 2014).

The suggestion that democracy is impossible in Egypt was countered by opponents to military rule and particularly derided by those within the anti-coup movement: “They have come up with this term called ‘dictatorship democracy’ [laughs] and I feel like ‘are you for real?!’ Sometimes in Egypt they never fail to amuse. They would say it is democracy…and that's what's happening with the military right now” (Salma, May 2014).

Offering his explanation for the generational divide, Ashraf suggested that the young revolutionary activists who oppose military rule were unable to engage in constructive discussions and that they should be “learning to be more pragmatic, practical, accepting what is possible”. He went on to explain:

I have a lot of arguments with Akil and his friends. They see that the current system is probably a new military dictatorship and they are very obviously unhappy about the police brutality, and I am unhappy about police abuse, it’s not nice, especially if it is one of my family or I am exposed to any of these abuses, it is disastrous, but you have to be realistic about how to sort it out. That’s the difference really, they feel that is has to be sorted out. There is also mistrust in the judiciary
system in Egypt…We inherited a state full of problems and it will not
be sorted out in one go. So we have to be patient (Ashraf, September
2014).

These comments are characteristic of the views among the older generation who support
Sisi: activists need to be realistic about how long it takes to get change and what kind of
change is possible. Hany, Ashraf and others again reveal echoes of Middle Eastern
exceptionalism, suggesting that Egypt cannot transition to democracy because its history
is one of continuity rather than change. However, even as they make the case that Egypt
needs to be led by a strong regime because of the threat presented by the Muslim
Brotherhood, they also insist democracy cannot happen in Egypt because it takes a long
time to learn and to understand. In making such comments they suggest they still view
democracy as a system of state-society relations worth aiming for.

6.3.2 “Everyone had a space”

In section 6.2.1, I showed that activists learned that one element of democracy concerns
the rule of law. I highlighted Ayesha’s learning about Hobbes’ conception of the Social
Contract, showing that, as she reflected on the way that people reacted to Raba’a, she
gained a deeper connection with, and understanding of, this foundational concept within
political philosophy. In this section, I move away from the notion of democracy as the
model for governing the relationship between state and society to consider how those
relations operate between people within society. I show that the struggle has, for some in
both secular and Islamist groups, generated a view that democracy is (or should be) about
the way we live together. Democracy should be, according to some, about how ‘the
people’ relate to and treat each other, allow for multiple voices to be heard, and enable
people to participate in transforming society.

Despite often referring to electoral processes and institutions, there were two key periods
of the struggle - the uprisings and protests of 25 January 2011 and 30June/3July 2013 - in
which some activists started to understand democracy as actually being about the way
people within a society behave towards each other. As I showed in Chapter Five, 25
January was often described (by activists who went to Egypt as well as those
demonstrating and participating within the UK) as a ‘utopia’ and a time and space where
people from all backgrounds “were living democracy” (Amira, April 2014), thereby providing the space for learning from and with others. However, along with processes of learning, the ‘utopian’ space produced a particular content within the activists’ learning: a civility emerged during this time that, particularly for British-Egyptians and long-term migrants, contrasted with previous experiences of life in Egypt. Ahmad noted, for example, “I only heard three words from the 28th to the 11th: sorry, excuse me, thank you. Sorry, excuse me, thank you. For the first time in my life to hear this in Egypt. This is one of the moments…” (Ahmad, August 2014). Similarly, Mona travelled to Tahrir from the UK with her father and brother and recalls:

Arriving at the airport it was all the same Egypt but when you got to Tahrir everyone trusted each other and it was a safe Egypt. You could just go into the square and have conversations and talk with anyone and everyone about everything and it was a whole different Egypt. You know, Egypt had gotten worse with people not trusting each other and society had changed in the last few years but in Tahrir it was completely different (November 2014).

These ‘utopian’ reflections “privilege” civil society (Grugel and Bishop 2014:41) and seek to narrate democracy as part of an everyday lived-experience where difference between people within society is accepted and, for some, embraced. The emphasis on relationships between ‘the people’ sit in contrast to rational and instrumentalist understandings that have resulted in narrow approaches of “ballot-box democracy” (Various Egyptian Activist Interviews) that is reduced to the implementation of implementable and measurable (Diamond 2008) structures and processes.

As a consequence of learning through discussing ideas with people who might offer a different perspective, activists learned about and reflected upon concepts related to politics and democracy and the broader idea of social change. For some of the activists who travelled to Tahrir during the 25 January revolution, the experience of the 18 days was, to use Amira’s words, “an incredible lesson in democracy”. This lesson occurred in a setting with people from various backgrounds where the “silent agreement” ensured everyone had the opportunity to be part of the revolutionary moment. Amira’s reflection below reveals what she learned through these processes:
In fact, we were living democracy. We were implementing the main tools of democracy at that time. People were open and everyone had a space. And this is something I will never forget. How this square [can] have so many different groups from different orientations and ideologies and people who were apolitical, and people who were against the corruption of the Mubarak regime. But everyone gave space to others. No one impinged on your space whatsoever, whether man, woman, child, old, young. Some people say it was utopian, but really for a few days it was like this, believe it or not it was utopian. It was like this, as silent agreement between everyone that we wanted this way. The people brought the best of their ideas, of themselves into this experience. So we were living this democracy. Everyone was speaking about politics. Everybody. I mean, even children were holding posters with political slogans, so the variety and the diversity and the openness were incredible and this is why when we come into discussions with people who say this was just an uprising and not a revolution, I disagree totally. It was a revolution from the bottom up. The other important element was of course democracy. This was an incredible lesson in democracy. No one felt oppressed or under any pressure to do anything they didn’t want to do. So whoever went to the square or to the street to take part in the protest, it was out of their own conviction. You remember last time when I said the revolution made the line very clear, white or black, there was no way you could be in a grey area if you decided to come on the streets. Maybe some of the people stayed at home if you were not sure what to do, that is another issue. But those that went on the street they were either against or for. No one went just to watch. Especially during those 18 days. They were either there to crush the protests, the counterrevolutionary camp, or they were the revolutionary camp. So democracy in the sense that no one impinged their opinions or forced their views on the others. Everyone had a space (Amira, April 2014).
This extract of Amira’s interview captured many of the sentiments that emerged in other activists’ reflections. In this ‘utopian’ moment, people with different ideologies, positions and backgrounds had a space to present their views, talk about what matters to them, display posters and banners, and participate in the protests in the way they wanted. Amira reiterates this again at the end, showing that the “tools” of democracy concern how people within a society relate to each other, without restricting different voices or forcing an idea on others, and where people contribute “the best...of themselves” to the collective project of bringing about social change. Democracy, in this interpretation, is understood through the relations between people of difference, in this case between people within the Square, which Amira and others (see Khaled, Heba, Mona, Ahmad) suggested became a microcosm of Egypt at that time.

Activists’ learning about society and the relations that create, control or constrain social change is complex. Although anti-coup activists emphasised notions of ballot-box democracy to protest against Morsi’s continued imprisonment, since 30June/3July and Sisi’s subsequent election they have little faith that this conception of democracy exists anywhere, even within established liberal democracies like the UK. Often reflecting similar despondency but from a position informed by their belief that the SCAF had manipulated political debate, secular activists were more likely to emphasise the notion of participation within democracy.

Secular activists have strengthened their resolve to demonstrate that, conceptually and materially, democracy should be the process and institution that enables them voice an opinion and take an active role in the process of social change. Although how they make their arguments may differ, secular and anti-coup activists both show they developed perspectives of democracy that focus on how we live together: they have conceptualised democracy by thinking about who participates in the structures and institutions that shape society and the relations between them. They demonstrates that for meaningful social change, people need to learn that democracy is about power and the many ways it shapes relations within society.

**6.4 Conclusions: Learning for progressive social change?**
This chapter has shown that, through their engagement with, and participation in, the Egyptian struggle since 25 January 2011, activists learned about and reflected upon various themes related to social change. They have reflected on the way the world works - within Egypt and globally - and many have learned about what kind of world they want for the future. In this section, I draw together the findings from this chapter to reflect on learning in struggle and the notions of power and democracy.

Theories of social change that emphasise economic development and liberal democracy attempt to conceal structures that lead to various forms of oppression and inequality. Through their participation in the struggle, many activists developed a more complex understanding of poverty, power and discourse. For example, by seeking further knowledge, some (particularly secular) activists made connections between poverty in Egypt, global financial institutions and the global political economy. They suggest that learning in struggle involves critique beyond the local context to global power structures. Activists also learned about the power of the media within Egypt to create and circulate discourses that divide and oppress, while serving the elite and ancien regime. They sought evidence of the power relations between the regime and formal institutions such as the judiciary, learning about mechanisms of government in the process. As well as critique and investigation based on empirical evidence, activists gained conceptual knowledge: they learned about the functions of government and the state, and terminology associated with politics, revolution and democracy.

Activists unlearn dominant discourses by participating in social action and struggles for change (Foley 1999). While this is evident for the activists opposing the military regime, the nationalists’ perspectives and the division between the different ‘groups’ in Egypt suggest there is more to explore about how people come to different understandings of truth, and the notion of ‘deep unlearning’ that requires being open to confronting, ‘letting go’ and grieving for old ‘truths’ and knowledge (see Macdonald 2002; Boyd and Meyers 1998). In Egypt, to experience ‘deep unlearning’ may require relinquishing the attachment to discourses associated with liberal democracy - including narratives of stability and security used by SCAF. The triggers associated with such a process of unlearning may be violent and bloody; they may happen for different people at different times; and it is likely they will be challenging - emotionally and ‘logically’.
Drawing particularly on the response by ‘Western powers’ to 3 July, Raba’a and subsequent support for Sisi’s presidency, many activists rejected outright the notion of democracy as conceptualised within liberalism. They learned that liberal democracy, being focused on holding elections, does not guarantee free or equal political participation, open debate or the respect for difference, and that states will prioritise their economic interests over the freedoms that might be borne out of democracy. As activists presented their critiques of liberal democracy, they suggest that democratic struggles are important spaces through which participants can learn about the role of power in processes of social change. Activists developed a normative view of social change, rejecting the emphasis on process and institution in favour of ideas of democracy that focused on the way people live together and are treated by each other, including by the state. However, despite learning about and critiquing the limitations of ballot-box democracy, some anti-coup activists emphasised elections and voting within their grievances against the incarceration of Mohamed Morsi. By basing their arguments against ‘the coup’ on the legitimacy of elections at the same time as arguing for a broader, more participatory understandings of democracy where all voices are heard, these activists highlight the complex nature of learning for social change within the global hegemony of liberal democracy.

Activists react to, participate within and learn from the continuing processes of social change, and their perspectives continue to change and develop in response to new situations. Although the reflections are wide ranging and present many questions for how social change is conceptualised and therefore how it might be achieved, is evident that activists who became conscious of the processes and structures through which power shapes relations within society. They show that learning in social movements can lead to new, deeper or different understandings of the world and ideas of social change. For some, engaging in a movement for social change involves thinking about alternatives to liberal democracy, a critical dimension of learning for progressive social change.
CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNING IN STRUGGLE

The Revolution changed my life. It changed my perspective to everything (Amira, April 2014).

Taking part in the activities since the military coup has totally changed my life... Actually going into the square in August 2013 means that everything changed for me (Yusuf, March 2014).

I reached a state of hopelessness where I thought nothing could happen. Until the 25 January revolution which took us completely by surprise and it just completely changed my life (Ashraf, September 2014).

Chapters Five and Six explored how and what activists learned by participating in the Egyptian struggle. I showed that, through collective practices of social movement participation and individual moments of critical reflection, they developed their understandings, perspectives and consciousness of various dimensions of social change. In this final empirical chapter, I examine the implications of participating in a social movement. I respond to the third research question, ‘In what ways does learning in social action impact activists’ engagement with processes of social change’. I do this by connecting processes (Chapter Five) and content (Chapter Six) of learning to examine the impact of participating and learning in social movements on the activists themselves. This chapter contributes to a recognised gap in the study of social movements (Hall and Turay 2006), namely the effects of movement participation on activists, by examining the personal impacts, the shape of group activism and the implications of learning in struggle on political engagement.

The chapter begins by examining the effects of learning in struggle on the activists as individuals. I explore how learning in struggle impacts movement participants personally by drawing attention to the connections between learning and empowerment. I
investigate how participating and learning in a movement enables activists to develop social ties and an increased sense of solidarity and belonging. I then examine the impact of learning in struggle on the activists’ engagement with ‘formal and informal’ politics by exploring how this learning has manifested in the activists’ practices and strategies. I show they have adapted the way they participate in both formal and informal politics and argue that they have developed skills for future activism.

As I have noted above, attributing cause and effect to social movement activism is problematic because there are so many other factors to consider as to why someone’s perspective or understanding might have changed. It is not possible to prove that participation is the reason someone becomes a ‘better citizen’, as such changes are difficult to measure (Mansbridge 1995). However, just as educational theory attributes specific interventions to changes in a learner, detailed accounts of learning in struggles show it is possible to interpret activists’ learning (Foley 1999) and conclude that participating in the Egyptian struggle involves experiences that impacted the activists’ understandings of, and interactions with, the world. Before looking at how learning in the struggle has impacted the activists, it is worth reiterating that not all of them had been politically active or participants of a social movement or organisation before 25 January. While living in the UK, most of the participants stayed connected to Egypt through their families, visiting on holidays and sometimes attending cultural events. Where appropriate, I draw attention to the activists’ level of previous engagement.

This chapter demonstrates that activism is an important dimension of lifelong and lifewide learning, and that many activists within the UK are more engaged in politics and social change because of the learning processes associated with participating in the Egyptian revolution and continuing struggle. Their perspectives illuminate understandings of what it means to be politicised and, therefore, provide useful insights into the impact of learning in social action on knowledge, understanding and perspectives of, and engagement with, politics (in its broad and narrow sense) and social change.

7.1 The personal effects of learning in struggle

In Chapter Two, I established the connection between learning and consciousness and argued that an important dimension of learning in the struggle relates to the development,
shape and transformation of the activists’ “thoughts, ideas and concepts” (Allman 2001:33). Chapter Five demonstrated the processes through which critical consciousness develops, while Chapter Six showed that movement participation develops knowledge and understandings of various constituents of social change, in particular, democracy. Activists revealed that the experience of participating, observing and reflecting on the events and the experience has impacted them in ways beyond their consciousness, in how they feel about themselves as agents of change and in their practical participation within the struggle. They suggested that - in 2014, at least - they were determined and committed to continue being actively engaged in Egypt’s struggle.

The commitment to sustained participation can be explained by two key factors: First, the empowering effects of learning, and second, the deepening of social ties and solidarity towards Egypt and specific identities. In this chapter, I use ‘personal’ to refer to the internal and affective qualities that are developed through movement participation, rather than to the ‘personal and biographical’ life choices (such as the inclination to get married, a ‘biographical’ feature within the few studies of social movement activism, see Giugni 2008; McAdam 1989).

7.1.1 The personal experience of reflection leading to action

In this section, I demonstrate that one of the personal effects of learning in struggle is the connection that activists make between critical reflection and action. Activists experience a personal shift in their understanding, which as the next section shows, can be empowering.

A central element of Paulo Freire’s conceptualisation of ‘conscientization’ is the connection between consciousness and action whereby consciousness is developed through the act of transforming social relations (Allman 2001). Sana illustrates the process of coming to conscientization where reflection and action are entwined and ‘inseparable’ (Allman 1999). Her critical perspectives and actions were triggered by conversations with others and the gradual and deepening process of critical reflection. This critical consciousness manifested in a more ‘assertive’ (Davies 2008) perspective and approach that reinforce each other:
I did have my anti-regime stance but I didn’t know where should we go from there so I needed to hear people and start forming my own stance. Then with time, when you hear people talking, you start forming your own critical mind and critical thinking of the regime’s actions. You start forming your own stances and you start forming own fighting talk. You start to develop what to do next rather than waiting to hear from different people to come up with an idea. You are the one that thinks in your own mind (Sana, June 2014).

Like many activists, Sana shows that listening, reflecting and behaving more critically are interrelated dimensions of critical consciousness, and that although it may be triggered through the collective experience, it involves intensely personal and individual processes of reflection. Sana reveals a sense of independence and strength that is generated from developing her own version of a “fighting talk”, suggesting that conscientization is continuing and cyclical: once an activist is reflecting, thinking and acting critically, their critical consciousness will continue to be reinforced.

Critical reflection occurs in struggles through conversations where activists are challenged, and where they challenge others. Zakaria recalls being approached in Tahrir Square during the 18 days by undercover policemen and being given documents to read about the revolution. In response, he “tried to make a counter-attack. I would say to them, ‘Who do you work for? Are you happy?’” (Zakaria, April 2014). Having learned about and reinterpreted his view of the regime because of the presence of undercover police and their tactics to derail the protests, Zakaria translated his critical reflection into critical action: he not only directly challenged the undercover police officers’ power but also questioned them in such a way that, he hoped, would encourage them to think to critically too.

Examining the ways in which activists act on their critical consciousness offers further evidence of how this criticality is developed. Elections and referendums were important events of learning because activists thought carefully about the use of their votes and the messages they would allow them to send to political leaders. In the 2013 election between Mohamed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood) and Ahmed Shafiq (SCAF), secular opposition felt they had little real choice. Having gained new information through the
revolution, many activists questions their decisions, reflecting on the different justifications in depth, trying to think ‘logically’ about each scenario and how it would be interpreted by the political establishment:

I spoiled my vote but the reason I did that [laughs] was because I lived abroad… If I was in Egypt at that time I would have voted for Morsi. I couldn't have even thought about the idea of having Shafiq as president. I could not bear it. But the reason is that I felt like the Egyptians abroad, the total registered votes is like 600,000 and the turnout is usually 60%. So it wouldn't really change things and I felt like, okay, I will spoil my vote as a warning sign to Morsi because if he found a lot of spoiled votes he would then give more concession to the revolutionary camp and then people would be more convinced to vote for him. This was my whole logic. And the other thing was that because I am living abroad I felt if I vote for Morsi I know that there will be consequences for me because they are very conservative, they will annoying people and their personal space and I will not suffer from that. So I thought I can’t. But if I was in Egypt and I would bear the consequences then. This was the whole logic (Faoud, August 2014).

Faoud, like many activists, talked at length about the different justifications for why they did or did not vote in a particular way at a specific time. Ayesha argued, “that we don't want to vote when people are being killed. What sort of election is that taking place under dire circumstances?” (April 2014). As they explained their actions (whether they boycotted or for which candidate they voted) they showed that they had critically reflected on the context in which elections and referendums took place. Importantly, they had considered the different consequences of each option: they were cognisant of the potential impact of their actions:

I would want history to record that the turnout was as low as it possibly could be. I would just try to do my bit to keep it low…Because it was presented in a time and space when democracy could not flourish. It was not a democratic document because it was a document created in an atmosphere of tyranny. And that whole population could not vote. People
that were voting yes were voting because they wanted this just to stop. They were not voting for something new (Nour, March 2014).

Although activists often provided slightly different reasons for boycotting or voting in a certain way, the main point to take away here is that critical reflection led to action: deciding to boycott with the intention of producing a low-turnout shows critical engagement with notions of power and democracy, and an understanding of the relationship between their thinking, action and the potential consequences. Critically reflecting in this way deepens the activists’ critical consciousness and the sense of taking action. This is a personal process linked to empowerment, the focus of the next section.

7.1.2 Becoming patient and empowered

For secular and anti-coup activists who actively oppose military rule, the 18 days in January and February 2011 remain hugely significant and symbolic because, against all expectations, they were the cause of Mubarak’s downfall. Activists recounted the overwhelming sense of surprise and shock that the protests garnered so much support and caused Mubarak to resign: “We never imagined, never, never not even the leftists, the revolution was a complete surprise” (Amira, April 2014) and many revealed a palpable sense of despondency since Sisi’s election. Despite being shocked at what they had achieved in 2011 and despairing of the changes since 2013, activists clearly learned of their own power as actors within the Egyptian context who can, collectively and individually, trigger change. As Ayesha remarked, “it is the idea of agency that we have captured” (April 2014).

Before exploring this in more depth, I should highlight an important element of Ayesha’s comment that guides this section. Ayesha comments that Egyptian activists have “captured” the “idea” of agency and, for a time, their actions created the opportunities to bring about change. In other words, through the 25 January revolution, activists perceived themselves to be people who could act in ways that would, to draw on Sen (1999:18), expand their freedoms and “influence the world”. While their formal agency may have diminished since the initial expansion of political space during 25 January (if agency is understood in its structural sense as being about the institutions that determine freedom), many Egyptian activists feel empowered by the experience and perceive
themselves as having the capacities to be agents of change. This personal sense of agency continues, even if, in reality the spaces within which to enact their agency has been restricted by the actions of Sisi’s government (see Chapter Four, section 4.3 for a discussion of the current context in which activists mobilise).

The 25 January revolution interrupted the way many people thought about politics in Egypt and the perception that social and political change there was impossible. The enormity of change is the root of activists’ empowerment. For instance, many activists reported that they had not participated in social movements or political processes prior to 25 January because nothing ever changed. For most, this meant they saw no point in voting or taking part in social movements, even if, like Kefaya, the group had a small but established support base (Shorbagy 2007; Oweidat et al 2008). Despite the huge numbers of people clicking ‘attend’ on the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page (Ghonim 2012, participant observations), activists suggest there was a widespread disbelief that the protests would have any impact on the social or political order in Egypt. One reason put forward for this disbelief was because of the following:

You can’t just do a revolution by setting an appointment beforehand. Revolutions just happen. I thought this was never going to work and I was very pessimistic about it and actually I didn't go to the very first demonstration. I woke up on the 25 and I was making fun of it all the time and then suddenly I saw that many people were on the streets and I went with my brother three or four hours after it started, so yes, that is what made me think there is something that can happen (Khaled, March 2014).

Even those who had actively opposed the regime prior to 25 January were surprised that Mubarak’s resignation came when it did, as Faoud recounts:

I was thinking all these scenarios in my head and I [was] sure it was going to happen but I never imagined it was going to happen that soon. And then when I saw. I was just thinking it would need time to build up. I have seen things start to happen since 2004 and I thought
‘no - it is inevitable it is going to change but it needs time, to have the right people’ (August 2014).

Like many of the activists who were in the UK during the 25 January revolution, Faoud was consumed by the events that took place in Egypt. People spoke of missing work and university, of sleeping on sofas to be able to watch the news while also following YouTube and Twitter, and of being on the phone throughout the day and night. Whether in the UK or Egypt, they were imagining “scenarios” where Egypt had changed. For many, they were searching for ways in which they could contribute, despite being in the UK. This was a process that challenged previous ideas about their political participation and prompted many to engage in protests in ways they had not done before.

The 25 January revolution has generated opportunities for activists to rethink their understandings of politics and political change. They illustrate the relevance of thinking about ‘political imagination’ (Von Kotze 2012) and how activism enables the ‘disintegration’ of the past (Hobson and Welbourne 1998), including how activists saw themselves within that past. It is perhaps because so few activists believed the protests would end in Mubarak’s resignation that they perceived an expansion of their agency and felt empowered as agents of change. Going from not having any belief that things would change to being part of an unimaginable change resulted in a complete transformation of what many Egyptians thought was possible. They had experienced situations where they learned to imagine a different future. These insights suggest struggle enables hope to become ‘possible’ (Hall, Clover, Crowther and Scandrett 2012) through pedagogy that Freire (1970:65) calls “revolutionary futurity…prophetic…hopeful”.

Significantly, activists believe that the impossible became reality because of their actions and, for many, this has created new ways of thinking about and engaging in Egypt’s future, in which they are agents who can be part of creating social change. Zakaria, for example, believes he has become more of a "critical person, not only critical but having an imagination, how we can imagine change. Being able to change and accepting change” (April 2014). Similarly, Yusuf argues Egyptians no longer have to “accept reality”, emphasising that agency has been generated because the change happened as a consequence of the actions of protesters and activists:
25 January didn't change much in Egypt but it taught us that there is a way to be proud of how we live and that we do not need to accept reality. That we can say no. Regardless of the vote [2014 presidential elections] and seeing how Sisi will run the country, I can still say no. And this is what January 25 has changed. Say for example, January 25 had not existed, and Mubarak died and Sisi came after him, the feeling of January 25 gave me something completely different. Now I know that I can say no and I can think differently and try to change that. The feeling that I need to change things will always be there (Yusuf, March 2014)

For some, imagining change appears to be a precursor to understanding and acknowledging their agency and power as an activist to be part of making the imagined change a reality. “Power to is about agency - intention or consciousness of action” and is often thought about in terms of empowerment (Eyben 2005:17, emphasis in original). At the individual level, participating in the struggle has generated a belief in activists’ power to be agents of social change, where they felt “like I am actually doing something rather than just visioning or just dreaming about change” (Sami, September 2014). At the collective level, “these 18 days are very, very important because it shows us what we can do when we want and when we unite…” (Heba, May 2014). The experience of 25 January produced activists who are more confident that their participation can make a difference in the lives of others and that they can resist the ‘reality’ of an Egypt with the army in power. Sami continues: “It felt like I was actually doing my part or as much as I could in order to help the cause and the struggle in Egypt” (September 2014).

Activists (particularly those who identify with revolutionary socialist and secular positions) are still seeking to understand what happened during and since the 18 days, including how they contributed. This search continues to be an intellectual and emotional challenge. Dina notes:

Some people are frustrated. Not really because the situation is frustrating but because they lack resources or the background or other country’s experiences. So if you think of how things work in Britain or France or even the struggle for the rights of black Africans in America, this took 100 years. I’m not saying I want Egypt to struggle for 100 years but at the same time I think it is very
naive to think that things will improve in three years, it is nothing (Dina, March 2014).

As a self-confessed ‘pragmatic realist’, Dina draws comparisons between Egypt’s situation and other historical cases of struggle as a way to rationalise and understand the turbulence of the post-Mubarak’s period and her own actions. With a different process of rationalisation, Sana (a human rights activist who, through the revolution, discovered a place in the revolutionary socialists) notes the significance of socialist literature that she was introduced to through the revolution. Reading socialist texts, as Sana demonstrates, can be significant in developing a ‘critical thinking and revolutionary praxis’ (Allman 1999). It has influenced her determination to continue in the struggle:

At that time I hadn’t read a lot of socialist books that says revolutions take years and that the workers class are the ones that start things so wasn't really aware about the Mahalla movement and that it could create that huge change later on (Sana, July 2014).

Sana, like many activists, did not go to the 25 January protests immediately. She did not believe that they could create change given the level of oppression in Egypt at that time: “I didn’t oppose people’s right to a better life. I didn’t believe 25 January could create a change because the regime was too oppressive.” She went on to explain that she now believes, “we have to embrace this chance, we have a chance now.” Interestingly, Sana suggests her initial disbelief in the potential to create change was because of a lack of knowledge about revolution and struggle, suggesting that her self-directed enquiries have been an empowering learning process that has contributed to her a greater sense of agency as an activist. Despite the increased dangers since 2013 (Dunne 2015), she now expects to be part of a long process of change.

While activists from all groups or persuasions admit that Sisi’s election presents a significant challenge, the fact they forced out an autocratic ruler after 30 years in power retains significant symbolic power:

Even now if I'm saying I'm pessimistic for the future but whenever I think that Egyptians removed three regimes in the past three years
who knows, in one year things may change again (Khaled, March 2014).

Activists are continuing to mobilise, largely because they have been empowered. They noted that previous demonstrations managed to topple three regimes, and that this shows they could do it again. Although this alludes to power as a competition between opponents where it is won and lost, it highlights the power that is created *within* when people participate in change. Even with the setbacks under SCAF since 2013, activists feel empowered because they are no longer afraid, as Mohammed explains:

Now you see kids, children, young girls, they are not afraid of the bullets. They are not afraid of grabbing. They are not afraid of torture in the police station. Every day they go to the streets and demonstrate and they know at the end of the day maybe she or he or all of you will after [sic] be arrested, be tortured, be killed. Right? And they still go. 13 months now and they still insist. Forget their freedom. Why? Because they tasted the taste of freedom. The International community has to understand this. The Egyptian people have changed. The Libyan people have changed. They are not coming back to the situation which we were under the umbrella of the dictatorial regimes any more. I think the majority, not all of the people, I'm talking about the majority of people when they taste freedom, you don't want to let that go away (Mohammed, August 2014)

Similarly, Eman, who had been engaged in social action prior to 25 January, has been empowered by the struggle and her participation in the human rights movement. She learned that it is important not to “think too much of the thing you fear” (Eman, August 2014), in her case the police. By coming to understand the ways in which the police used and abused their power *over*, and by choosing to focus her efforts on what she could do rather than the things that might limit her, she ‘unlearned’ the power the police had *over* her and her actions. In other words, she consciously relinquished the notion that the police were protectors. She developed a strategy that foregrounded her own agency and focused her actions on what she perceived to be her *power to*. She demonstrates that by
consciously rejecting a discourse – a dimension of unlearning - activists can develop a sense of the power that can be created within.

Learning and accepting that revolutions take a long time appears to have also been empowering for activists. Activists learned to accept that, however violent or oppressive the situation in 2014 was, it was as part of the longer process of meaningful social change. They learned that this acceptance is something from which they can gain strength and determination:

I learned to be patient. I learned not to give up because there is every reason to give up. It made me feel that I can change things. It can be small, tiny. But if I can start something for another generation. I sometimes ask my parents and grandparents why they did not do something. If people had these things as a life aim, if enough people thought like this then things would be a lot better. I am learning to be a lot more patient (Salma, August 2014).

Some of the events associated with the struggle have become grievances that activists still struggle to come to terms with. For example, the coup d’etat of 30June/3July, the violence that followed and Sisi’s election in 2014 remain major concerns. However, activists have been empowered by learning to theorise events within the broader process of a continuing revolution and accept the negative moments of struggle as an inevitable part of revolutionary social change:

I have a feeling that this is the only way out, that things must get so much worse that the people lose hope because now they tried Mubarak, SCAF, Sisi and the Islamist and the only thing they didn't try is the revolutionaries. So maybe one day they will try them because there is nobody else after all the options failed (Khaled, March 2014).

Within both groups who oppose military rule, activists have been empowered and developed a greater sense of their agency as people who can create, and have created, change. They have learned of the power that comes from imagining change and of their own power to create that change. By participating and theorising their experiences, many
have overcome their fear of the actors or institutions that they felt had power over them. In short, learning in struggles for social change fosters empowerment, activist commitment and determination: activists are more conscious of multiple power relations, and more alert to their own power to create change. In the next section, I explore the personal effects of participating in a group context, demonstrating that power can be generated in solidarity with others and lead to sustained movement participation.

7.1.3 Collectivity sustains participation

Participating in protest generates “oppositional consciousness, solidarity and collective identity” (Taylor, Kimport, Van Dyke and Andersen 2009: 878). Through the shared experience of protest and demonstration during the 25 January revolution and the continuing struggle, activists developed relationships at three levels: they developed friendships and connections with other activists; they developed social ties to particular activist groups such as the revolutionary socialists or the Muslim Brotherhood; finally, the majority suggest participating in the struggle has resulted in a deeper sense of solidarity towards other Egyptians.

Organising events, participating at demonstrations and experiencing a period of immense social change created bonds between activists. They became spatially connected, forming new relationships at sit-ins in Tahrir Square, Alexandria and Raba’a, and [by engaging with activists] at various events, meetings and demonstrations in the UK. For example, at a sit-in in November 2011, Ayesha met a fellow Egyptian living in the UK: a friendship developed, connected through their activism and subsequent professional work with other Egyptians. Similarly, along with three other activists based in the UK, Faoud created an activist group and met many more Egyptians through the process. Reflective of the disparate locations in which Egyptians have settled in the UK (Karmi 1997), Mona says she did not know any Egyptians in the UK prior to the 25 January revolution but connected with people at various demonstrations and, through those connections, became active within the anti-coup movement. As one activist I spoke to at a demonstration in London commented:

I had not been active or involved before 25 January but since then I thought ‘we’ve done it once, we can do it again’ so I started coming to
protests and demonstrations on my own and then started to bring my family (Participant Observations, August 2014).

Participating in a movement or group can foster collective identity (for a discussion of the abundant literature, see Poletta and Jasper 2001). For some activists, their intention to sustain their involvement with the revolution derives from the feeling that they have become part of a group and are connected to others through various networks. Activists displayed multiple identities that varied in strength (Huddy 2001), as Omar illustrates:

[I continue] out of my appreciation of the work of the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] from the beginning of the 20th Century. People say it’s about legitimacy but…it’s about their struggle…about personal attachment… I would get calls from people in Egypt during the coup who would say “please continue” and “you don’t know how much it helps us knowing you’re with us” (October 2014).

Omar suggests his continued participation is motivated by his desire to oppose to military rule in Egypt and to show his support for Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. He demonstrates that activists can be motivated to participate through what Klandermans (2014) refers to as ‘superordinate’ (in this case, the identification with Egypt) and ‘subgroup’ identities (attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood). Through participating in the struggle, Omar, and others engaged in action alongside people who had the same understanding of the different issues, in this case the same grievance with the Rab’a massacre and 2013 coup.

Group identification appears to have a circular relationship with sustaining participation: by being part of the collective experience, people create networks which then reinforces their intention to continue participating. For example, Sana connected with human rights activists in Egypt, learning from them and working alongside prominent activists who she regards as “friends”. In the quotation below, she explores how protests led her to become part of the human rights movement and how her participation gained traction as she met more people and became more involved in the network:
I started taking to the streets whenever there were protests and people started to know me and I started to know them…in February I didn’t know many people…so I didn’t join the discussions in the streets or in revolutionary groups but when I did talk online about what was going on there were very few people tweeting from Alexandria and this created some kind of trust about what I published and I put photos and this kind of linked me with people online and I could say ‘hi, I know you so let’s meet so when I go to the protests.’ Through this we created the circle with the people who have been working before on the streets, like people like Mahainour because she has always been there and with new people like me. And actually, if you see No Military Trials group in Alexandria I would say maybe two of the people had been previous activists but all of the people started being activists after the revolution. So I would say this was very strong, creating one link with another and then another. It’s like in steps, so a link to one person then one to another and so on (Sana, May 2014).

Activists are able to form connections and networks by attending protests but also, as Sana highlights, online. Through social media, Sana was able to create a legitimate identity as an activist in the struggle and forged connections with the activist movement that strengthened as she continued to participate in the 25 January revolution and beyond. Online spaces are an important tool for creating connections and building networks (Castells 2012; Ghonim 2012) and, as Sana demonstrates, opening up new spaces for learning with and from other activists.

Activists suggest that their commitment to future engagement in social and political action in Egypt is because it is specifically about Egypt, though they also act because of the individual relationships people gain through participating in protest and social movements. Participation was, for many, triggered through a shared identification with their ancestral connection to Egypt. Being part of the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) of Egypt sustains commitment to the struggle: “As long as Egypt needs us [Egyptians in the UK], I will always stay involved” (Mona, November 2014). For some, the experience of connecting with other Egyptians during the struggle has deepened their sense of solidarity to the notion of ‘Egypt’ and its future. Through participating in the
Egyptian struggle, activists learned more about Egypt and its people. For some, their personal sense of connection to the struggle comes from the belief that they are creating progressive change in a place that they feel more connected to. Ayesha explains:

I wanted to know whether I could really sacrifice my life for something that I had always said I would sacrifice my life for... Being with the people, letting them lead - what do they think is the right way to rebel or to challenge or to resist injustice? By going there, I transferred my body there insight of danger. I did not give the gift. I got the gift by feeling like for the first time I belonged to Egypt in a way I have not felt before (Ayesha, April 2014).

Activists from across the political and ideological divide commented that they were compelled to keep participating so that the future of Egypt could be better than its past. Despite living in the UK, their political engagement remains focused on the Egyptian context and the sense that they could use their positions in the UK to help people in Egypt. Adel refutes any suggestion that Egyptians in the UK are motivated to participate because it will improve their own lives:

When I protest, I am not protesting for myself! I live in London, I live in one of the best parts of London, I don't need anything. [Sarcastically] So what if the military takes over Egypt for another 60 years!? (Adel, May 2014).

Activists explained, often with emotive candour, that they participate because they “would wholeheartedly like Egypt to come out of this with having achieved something. With having actually broken away from its history” (Nour, March 2014). Activists from all three groups – (secular/revolutionary, Islamist/anti-coup and nationalist) reflected at length on the ‘State of Egypt’ (Al Aswany 2011) and what they saw as the problems that needed to be tackled. They are motivated by Egypt’s history, by the recent past (specifically 25 January) and by their learning of how things could be better and different:
I don’t want Egypt to turn into a state of chaos again…I thought of the struggle and the pain of 2011 and I thought of seeing all that eclipsed…I want things to be systematised… My unhappiness towards the trend in Egypt that anything goes - we don’t care about the system. For example, my gran would pick a president for being presentable and that he talks well…No matter that he’s in a mob. It’s un-education, un-awareness. It’s fighting that (Omar, October 2014).

The determination to continue engaging with Egypt’s struggle, as in Omar’s account, often had an emotional resonance and attachment to the (possibly romanticised) memory of the 18 days. For activists opposing military rule, 25 January retains a symbolic power that “keeps me hopeful” because it connects activists in the UK with other people who struggle in relation to Egypt, “the people who still believe in the revolution and the people who, despite all this darkness, they are still working hard to improve things” (Salma, August 2014).

These emotional connections are an important dimension of solidarity (Featherstone 2012). In the Egyptian case, many activists suggest they are motivated to continue participating because of how they emotionally connect with the struggle. The emotional impulse for ongoing participation derives from a deepened identification with Egypt and specific groups associated with the struggle as well as from the emotional memory attached to the 25 January revolution and the people who keep it alive. I explore these ideas in connection to learning for social change in Chapter Eight.

7.2 Implications for activist practices

In the previous section, I demonstrated that participating in struggle can be empowering because activists come to understand their agency. In this section, I develop this further and show that feelings of solidarity, personal connection and consciousness of the ‘problem’ are also factors that shape how and why activists participate in continued action. When activists talked about “keeping the issue alive” (Rana, September 2014), they highlighted the intersections between the emotional and practical dimensions of activism.
Having established that activists learn and develop their understandings of the world and that they are empowered through participating (see previous section), I now turn to the implications of participating and learning through struggle on the shape of their continued activism or engagement. I present the impact of participating and learning in social action on activists’ behaviours and practices of engagement with formal and informal politics. I also examine the acquisition and application of new skills. In the first two sections, I distinguish between the trajectories of two core groups of activists: the anti-coup/Islamist activists, and the secular/revolutionaries. I do this because, through the course of the research, activists who associated with these two ‘movements’ (as groups within the broader movement of the Egyptian revolution) displayed different activist practices. Anti-coup activists maintained their group presence, but changed how they mobilised from protests to awareness raising actions. Differently, secular activists reported taking time away from organised action to engage more at the individual level, with many distancing themselves to reflect on what they should do next. I must also note that I met activists from both groups at national demonstrations such as the ‘Stop the War’ campaign in London during the escalation of violence in Gaza during 2014 and anti-austerity protests in Manchester in 2015. The remainder of the section then returns to the broader perspective to examine learning in struggle and the implications for activists’ skills and practices of engagement and participation in formal and informal politics.

In Chapter Six, I demonstrated that activists learn by critically reflecting on the world around them and develop perspectives of how the world should be. In this section, I explore how, through individual learning in the collective context of struggle, activists’ perception and intended participation in formal and informal politics have changed. I demonstrate that social action is an important space through which activists develop skills for continued activism. Many activists feel that they have become more patient as a result of engaging with Egypt’s struggle for change, primarily because they perceive the 18 days as the beginning of a long process of change. This learning appears to have impacted the shape and scope of their continued activism. Activists are conscious that bringing about meaningful social change in Egypt involves a longer process of deeper reflection about how they got to where they are now and new understandings of the kind of world they want to create.
7.2.1 Anti-coup activism: sustaining participation through awareness-raising action

After demonstrating almost every week during 2014 (noted by Adel, Salma, Omar, Yusuf, Mohammed and participant observations), anti-coup activists started to reflect on the success and purpose of such regular demonstrations. Many suggested that, by late 2014, the protests had lost their impact because they had been held so frequently. They acknowledged that attendance had decreased since the first anniversary of the Rab’a massacre in August 2014. Towards the remainder of 2014, anti-coup activism intentionally shifted from holding protests and demonstrations to ‘awareness raising’ activities, particularly targeting the British public with the aim of “changing public perception” (Rana, September 2014). Although they continued to organise demonstrations around specific events (for example, at the anti-austerity protests in October 2015 and during Sisi’s visit to London in November 2015), anti-coup activists suggested that the shift was because people within the movement felt that weekly protests “don’t have a huge impact anymore…they are helpful and important in Egypt and I am glad they are still going on in Egypt but I don’t think they are important here” (Rana, September 2014). Similarly, Farida commented that her mother thought there was no point in attending protests “because they are not changing anything” (November 2014).

Despite acknowledging that some felt the protests had lost their impact, many of the anti-coup activists I spoke to said they would continue to attend any that were organised. One reiterated that “we still need to stand in solidarity…in front of Downing Street, have leaflets, tell the public” (Farida, November 2014) about the events in Egypt. Anti-coup activists explained their continued involvement in solidarity actions and the intentional shift from holding protests and demonstrations to ‘awareness raising’ activities by noting that their audience was within Britain. Activists wanted to “send a message to the British government” (Rana, September 2014) that Morsi’s removal was a coup and that they should question the legitimacy of the Egyptian government, and communicate this message to the general public in the UK. Farida explains:

We keep going because we can raise awareness in the UK – so our government doesn’t recognise the regime as a legitimate government. It’s more important to raise awareness with people who are walking by
so they see what happened in Egypt [30June] is not a real revolution and it’s not legitimate. We’d go outside 10 Downing Street and Parliament Square, tell them you have to say it’s a coup. Because they haven't said it’s a coup, we have to make sure the British public know it’s not a legitimate government. Democracy has to stand. We don’t want army to overthrow the government that was chosen (Farida, November 2014).

Activists have questioned whether protests are necessarily the most effective action for the continued struggle and subsequently embraced various strategies for awareness raising. Actions taken by the anti-coup movement throughout 2014 include producing flyers and leaflets, organising conferences/events and flashmobs, creating videos and holding demonstrations at significant events (interviews and participant observations). Many talked about moving some of their action online (indeed, during 2015 I was contacted about a number of digital/social media-based activities undertaken by people aligned to the anti-coup position) to reach a wider audience and to respond to the receding attendance at weekly protests. Having “started believing more about the power of the media” during 25 January, Yusuf no longer just attends protests: he has set up a YouTube channel and creates videos “to deliver a message within Egypt, and to educate people in Egypt as well and support them the way we can” (Yusuf, March 2014).

Although anti-coup activists were adapting the way they engaged in the struggle, their continued attendance at demonstrations remains important. This is because of the perceived impact the continued support from people in the UK has on people in Egypt:

We know Al-Jazeera have broadcast the protests here so the solidarity is important to help them continue. For me it gives me encouragement that I want to do something as well… It is a sort of duty to go out and raise awareness about the things going on (Farida, November 2014).

As Farida illustrates, while UK-based anti-coup activists talk outwardly of participating to raise awareness within the British public of the Egyptian situation, feelings of solidarity remain a significant motivation for continued action. Through reflecting on their activism - its purpose and impact - anti-coup activists demonstrate that one outcome of learning in struggle is that activists are inclined to adapt their strategies and practices.
7.2.2 Secular activism: sustaining participation through individual action and building a movement

Having reflected on their role so far, anti-coup activists focus on raising awareness within the UK. These actions are often communicated to people in Egypt via social media, thereby conveying solidarity with those in Egypt at the same time as raising awareness within the British public. The anti-coup movement established a number of groups aligned around their criticism of the events at Rab’a and Sisi’s election. Although secular activists talked about engaging the wider public in the struggle, it was much less common, during 2014, for their actions to be part of an Egyptian-led group or movement within the UK. A small group held events in London to raise awareness of the continued human rights abuses, but it was more common for secular activists to raise the issue of Egypt at meetings, conferences and workshops, and connect with broader solidarity movements.

Many groups were established (predominantly online) during the initial fervour of the 25 January uprisings. However, the events of 30June/3July impacted the shape of activism significantly by creating divisions between and within groups. Among secular and revolutionary activists, for example, people responded differently to the violence after 30June/3July, suggesting that the learning process of reflecting on certain moments can impact how activists participate in the future. Faoud’s observations illustrate this:

The last thing we have done was the protest on 30 June. And then we actually had a sort of split even among our group. Remember I was saying we were four? Well, one of these four was so against what happened and we weren't as much against 3rd of July as he was and so he said I don't think we can keep going. After that we were all sort of [sic]. The danger is anything that happened afterwards was always hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood. Anything you do they would ruin it for you. So we just stayed quiet for almost a year now…We didn't do anything since then (Faoud, August 2014).

Since the violence during the summer of 2013, many secular activists living in the UK continued their participation individually rather than as part of organised UK-based
groups. This indicates that particular events - in this case in relation to the 30June/3July coup and Raba’a massacre - can prompt some people to retreat from organised action, perhaps to allow them time to reflect individually on what they saw. Most activists had their understandings of the world and the people around them tested during the violence of 2013. While anti-coup activists appear to have been united by their sense of deep injustice at the violence perpetrated against them, secular activists show that they continue to struggle to make sense of the events. Although many persist in trying to find ways to participate as the struggle continues, for some, this means participating individually and “silently” (Dina, March 2014).

Having learned about the complexities of the challenge that Egyptians face, many secular activists organised or attended academic conferences and workshops, and public events and demonstrations organised by national movements such as Stop The War, MENA / Egypt Solidarity, which also raised the Egyptian issue (observations 2014/15). At these events, activists highlighted the regime’s actions (the massacre, human rights abuses, detentions - see Chapter Four, section 4.2). One very active London-based Egyptian founded the ‘25JanEgyptians’ Facebook group during the 18 days and continued to attend the embassy regularly with placards to demonstrate against the “fascist” regime (observations 2014/15). This activist organised a number of solidarity and awareness raising events in London, attended by between 15-30 Egyptians (observations 2014). However, activists reported an overall decline in active participation at demonstrations since 30June/3July 2013, including on the 25 January anniversary in 2014. The general reduction in organised street-based activism by secularists was also evident during the 2014 presidential elections outside the Egyptian embassy. For example, nationalists celebrated Sisi’s impending election on one side of the road, anti-coup demonstrators on the other. In contrast, those who were aligned to the secular opposition came and went individually or in small groups, casting their vote without stopping to pay much attention to either of the opposing organised groups. The shape of their continued action reflects a more individual and personal form of participation.

Continued action by secular activists is influenced by what they learned in relation to the two narratives (Islamist and nationalist) that dominate Egypt’s social and political sphere. Having deepened their understanding of power and democracy, many argue that their activism should focus on trying to show Egyptians that there can be an alternative to
being governed by either the military or the Muslim Brotherhood. They acknowledge that the Muslim Brotherhood gained strength through over 80 years of grassroots organisation, and that the army retains widespread populist support. The following statement shows that secular activists now understand that they need to develop an organised opposition to counter both these narratives. They suggest that an important outcome of their learning during this period is of the necessity of an organised movement that has a clear understanding of its position and goals:

Everybody fully realises that this is the problem now. But it takes quite a while to understand that. It wasn't something that was very obvious in the beginning of the revolution. [At the time of Kefaya] among intellectuals they were discussing that but as more young people we did not even realise. But after the revolution there was a revelation that we were more concerned about the protests than building on it but now everybody is completely politicised and really involved some way or the other. They realise that they need to build this grassroots movement. I think this is something that a lot of people realise now and much, much more than the whole revolution has done (Faoud, August 2014).

Secular opposition activists continued to reflect on their actions and the events of the continuing revolution, learning about politics and their role in creating social change. The consequence of learning through processes of reflection appears to be related to the shape of their participation. For some, their reflections have caused them to adapt the manner of their participation and the practices and strategies through which they engage in social action. Others suggest that reflecting on the struggle is a factor that led them to disengage from collective action, noting that they needed time to understand “where we went wrong” (Amira, April 2014).

Secular activists have reflected on their ‘failures’ and what they perceive to be weak organisation. Understanding that their support is spread across many groups, parties and candidates is important because such insights offer the realisation that is required to create the processes and groups that can keep the “momentum alive” (Amira, April 2014). Having first become active in the secular opposition through 25 January, Sana explained the importance of the Left becoming organised:
If you want the revolution to be successful you need to organise yourself into groups, bring awareness to the public, talk about violations of the regimes, you need to tell people this is not how you should run a country. It is also about building political awareness of the people and arguing about the right things with the regime (Sana, July 2014).

Khaled notes that, although secular activists may participate less in organised movements or groups calling for social change since 2013, there is still the will to continue the struggle: “the curve is falling a little bit because many people are tired after three years of big events but still there is a willingness to do something…they will fight because they don't have any other options” (Khaled, March 2014). Secular activism in the UK has been less visible since 30 June and Raba’a, and during 2014 was much less organised than the anti-coup movement. However, secular activists strongly identify with what they were able to achieve when they were united and continue to be motivated and empowered by the memory of being instrumental in Mubarak’s downfall (see section 7.2).

As a result of learning in the struggle, secular and revolutionary activists based in the UK predominantly engaged in action to help people within Egypt understand - from their perspective - the underlying causes of Egypt’s problems. They learned that they gain power by working with others. They suggest this is why they need to build a movement that can convey to the wider Egyptian population that they need to accept that neither the army nor the Islamists have created change. Egyptians need to imagine a different way to create change.

7.2.3 Developing skills for future activism and engagement

In this section, I return to drawing on insights from activists more generally, without specific reference to whether they belong to the anti-coup and secular position. I do this to return to the overarching research question of the impact of learning in social movements rather than a specific group. I demonstrate that learning in struggle develops practical skills that will assist in practical day-to-day administration of future activism. During 25 January, this involved coordinating food and medical supplies and blankets for
people staying overnight in the sit-in at Tahrir Square (see Dina, Heba, Amira). Through participating in group action, and thus learning from other people, activists have gained skills for working with others, compromising where necessary and finding effective ways to communicate:

> I have learned that people will be difficult to work with but you have to go with it. Everybody kind of wants to be in charge and you just kind of have to try and find a balance and not always do things the way you want to do them (Rana, September 2014).

Many of these skills are developed by thinking about and reflecting on what they see as their successes and failures (as argued in the previous section), while other skills are developed through the practical processes of being participants in social and political activism. As activists explored the strategies they might want to use in the future, they also revealed a commitment and intention to remain actively engaged in the process of social change in Egypt.

Secular and anti-coup activists talked about taking time to step back and reflect on the events since 2011, including how their own actions contributed to Sisi’s election in 2014. These processes of reflection are a part of how activists are engaging and are entwined with their learning to be patient and resilient. Coming to understand the struggle as a long one means they have to consider the purpose, audience and shape of their future participation, and reflect on where they may have succeeded and how a different approach might work.

Interviews conducted with anti-coup activists towards the end of 2014 revealed that individuals and groups within the movement were in a phase of self-reflection, considering how they would participate in the future. For many, 25 January and 30 June/3 July were the first time they had participated in or organised any activism and, through reflecting on their actions, they were thinking about what they could do differently. They recognised that they had made mistakes – retrospectively becoming conscious of their own learning - but believed they had to do something, even if it wasn’t as effective as it could have been:
We know we have made mistakes in inconsistencies with messaging and maybe overdoing the protests every week and sometimes doing them in Arabic but we don’t regret that we were working like headless chickens because it was hard because at end of day you’re working with people who are working with real life jobs and study and we’ve never worked with a coup so we were not involved with activism and we didn’t know what to do. Everything had to be done asap…I think it’s good to change tactic and explore it and so at least I know it hasn’t worked so I don’t have to feel guilty that I didn’t try it. Take one step forward and reflect… At least raising awareness isn’t going to hurt… I don’t want to be the guy that says ‘it’s not going to work, it’s not going to work’ so there is no harm in trying, I guess (Omar, October 2014)

Reflexivity is a key process of learning in struggle because it shapes the way activists might engage (or disengage) in the future. For example, Omar, above, appears to be resilient to any criticisms because he reflects on his previous experience and on the fact that he is ‘at least’ doing something. This may be a feature of Omar’s own resilience and personality, but it could also illustrate that retrospective critical reflection is a specific learning dimension of activism that leads to increased empathy and commitment. Continued participation in struggle, Omar suggests, may also derive from a belief that it is better to try and fail than to not try at all.

As well as reflecting on the regularity and timing of protests, activists have learned that conducting demonstrations in Arabic is not helpful for communicating their position to the British public. This insight has prompted a discussion within the movement about having to be clearer about their strategy and audience:

The people who live here speak English so it’s more important we do it in English. I have friends who don’t speak Arabic but they are against the coup but they don’t understand what’s going on…We need to spread the message and it won’t happen if we don’t talk in English because they don’t understand. At a flash-mob in May people were walking by and they thought we were making a film and I said to them that we were raising awareness – we were giving out leaflets… I thought perhaps we
needed a poster…instead of just letting people make assumptions (Farida, November 2014).

Anti-coup activists are adapting their approach having understood that if they are demonstrating their solidarity to people in Egypt, speaking in Egyptian might be appropriate but if they are trying to raise awareness within the British population, then it is necessary to conduct demonstrations in English (for further discussion, see Underhill 2016a).

Questioning the effectiveness of a particular approach has also meant that some activists are thinking about a longer-term strategy, including, as illustrated above, how to mobilise in groups. Processes of self-directed learning and subsequent discussion have meant that activists now understand the importance of having a clear target of their activism, in this case, military rule if they are to be effective:

We know where to put the pressure, we know what the red lines are…You know, you just know. Before it was like fog but now you know what is going on and you can work on that. It will take way longer, obviously revolution doesn't take a day, it will take way longer but now you just know and you are a lot more aware (Ali, May 2014).

Sami explores this in more depth:

I feel the last year has been a year of sort of putting out fires, sort of keeping up with the momentum. Just making sure that you’re doing something. Personally, I feel like it’s come to the point where we sort of need to get back to the strategy table and...plan things much more properly. I feel that’s what’s happening or is going to happen here in the UK. Give ourselves a much more better or clearer plan for the coming period. I feel that ever since the coup happened it’s been temporary solutions, and nothing necessarily that’s like actually part of a bigger strategy or a bigger plan to oppose it. And I feel like this coming period definitely I’m going to take initiative…to get back to the planning table and say guys we need to write up a proper strategy and a proper plan.
We shouldn’t be thinking ‘that’s it, the coup tomorrow is going to go’.
We should be planning way further ahead in order for our work to be
much more effective and have an actual impact (Sami, September 2014).

Sami and Ali both reinforce the importance of theorising in the conceptualisation of
social movement learning. As well as theorising understandings of the world, they
demonstrate that learning in struggle involves critical reflection that can lead to
theorising the activist practice. Through the temporal distance, Sami reflected on the lack
of a strategy within the anti-coup movement and the necessity of organising and
planning. He reflected on what he and the movement could do better and considered the
different strategies that could be used in continued engagement with the struggle. This
kind of reflexivity demonstrates the fluidity and continued nature of social movements:
although activists may disengage from street-level activism, their commitment to and
engagement with the movements’ ideas and potential practices continues.

As activists reflected on how activism could have a more significant or different impact,
many talked about lobbying and engaging with institutionalised political processes. I
examine activists’ attitudes towards these forms of political engagement in the next
section.

7.3 Engagement with formal political institutions and processes

In Chapter Six, I showed that activists learned about the many ways in which power
shapes social and political change in Egypt. They reflected on various institutions related
to politics and social justice, were critical of ‘ballot-box democracy’ and developed a
broader understanding of democracy that focused on how people live together. Bearing
these findings in mind, I now explore how learning in struggle impacts activists’
engagement with formal political institutions and processes.

The insights outlined in this section show that activists’ attitudes towards actively
participating in institutionalised political processes of social change are complex,
personal and sometimes contradictory. Attitudes towards continued political engagement
are also heavily influenced by the context in which they would be participating: for
instance, when considering how they will engage in the struggle within Egypt, activists reject formal politics, arguing that they have “started to believe in more people-based politics because of the revolution” (Ayesha, April 2014). Activists who return to Egypt regularly and are eligible to vote commented that, particularly after Morsi’s election in 2012 and Sisi’s in 2014, they are retreating from being involved with formal institutions such as political parties and elections. When it comes to participating in politics within the UK, however, activists have adopted a strategic approach to engaging with political institutions that centres on raising awareness about the Egyptian struggle.

7.3.1 Lobbying: strategic political participation

Having learned that “politicians are responsible for millions of people not only in this country but also around the world”, Salma argues British-Egyptians “need to think about where to put our votes next…to be more involved within the UK. To write to their MP, to lobby, to be active citizens” (May 2014). Although most anti-coup and secular activists suggest they have concluded that Egyptians living in the UK should focus their efforts on demonstrating solidarity with the struggle more broadly, they also aim to:

change or raise awareness within the public here in the UK in order to eventually and ideally change government policy towards Egypt…our aim is to say ‘your government, or our government, in doing this, is investing and helping and supporting this regime which has been killing and torturing and detaining girls and boys and people of all ages and letting people die in prison…’ the main idea is to make a stand for this and say you need to make sure your government is not part of this, is not part of this crime” (Sami, September 2014).

Activists view lobbying as a long-term strategy through which to engage in the continued struggle. By arguing that lobbying is part of a clear plan, they suggest they have applied what they have learned in the struggle to the practices they use to participate in the future. In this case, they learned that the struggle would be a continuing one, which requires wider support from other actors, such as the UK government. They suggest having learned that the best way to do this is to engage with formal political institutions through lobbying. Faoud (August 2014) noted that, “[we] felt that a long-term plan was
that [anonymised] would turn into a lobby”, though he admitted being unsure that it would be successful. Activists suggest that, at this stage of the struggle, “the best we can do is to lobby our MPs and raise awareness…we’ve got to free ourselves” (Adel, May 2014). They suggest that, even if they are not doing it often, “we should be more engaged in formal politics. You know, lobbying MPs, writing to them…it is something that is important to be done” (Rana, September 2014) because creating change depends on reflection and action.

The struggle has impacted activists’ attitudes towards elections and voting but in ways that appear to be highly personal and contextualised. Because people’s attitudes towards voting changed depending on the election (constitutional referendum or presidential election, for example), it is problematic to draw conclusions about the extent to which learning in the struggle has impacted whether activists (those who are eligible) participate or boycott elections taking place in Egypt. However, their attitudes towards voting, or the way they reflect on their decision to vote in a particular moment, demonstrate a link between participating and learning in the struggle and forms of political engagement, as the remainder of this section demonstrates.

7.3.2 Participating or boycotting elections

Between 2011 and 2014, there were two presidential elections, constitutional referendums and parliamentary elections. It is notable that, apart from the anti-coup’s boycott of the 2014 presidential election (“We need the military to disappear totally. There’s no point engaging. I wouldn’t respect myself. It’s disrespectful to those that died” Salma, August 2014) activists aligned to the same position or group often presented vastly different justifications for whether they participated in or boycotted elections.

A common justification among secular and anti-coup activists for not voting in elections were the ‘undemocratic’ conditions under which elections were held in Egypt:

I didn’t vote [in the constitutional referendum 2012] because it was presented in a time and space when democracy could not flourish. It was not a democratic document because it was a document created in an
atmosphere of tyranny. And a whole population could not vote. People that were voting ‘yes’ were voting because they wanted this just to stop. They were not voting for something new. So again, I wanted turnout low and I am happy that it was low. I’m happy that the record books will show that the turnout 38.6% and it could have been a lot higher than that (Nour, March 2014).

Nour further illustrates understandings of democracy that emphasise the way in which people live together, how they relate to each other and the institutions that make a democracy ‘flourish’ or become ‘tyrannical’. He also illustrates the strategic thinking behind many activists’ decisions whether to participate in elections or not, suggesting that a low turnout would convey a message of dissatisfaction and possible dissent.

Many respondents (including many secular activists) disagreed with boycotting, despite being frustrated and angered by the social and political context in which elections were taking place. They argued that:

[boycotting] is useless because there will always be enough people that go there [to vote]... one of the things that we learnt in the 2012 referendum about the constitution is that it is better to go and vote no than to not vote at all because at least if we didn't win it we at least questioned and challenged the percentage of the votes (Khaled, March 2014).

Again, activists justified their decision to participate in elections as part of a wider strategy of dissent, in this case to show that there are people who will vote against the interests of the military regime. Dina, for example, referred to elections prior to 25 January when she “was really idealistic. I even wrote on the paper I am not giving you any legitimacy.” In the 2014 election, however, she notes that, “even with these choices, I knew that I would not abstain again because I know that my decision does not only affect me it affects 40 million people under poverty and they are paying the price” (Dina, May 2014).
Having grown increasingly disillusioned with political institutions and the ‘failure’ of the revolutionary movement, many activists have distanced themselves from formal political processes and structures in Egypt. Some activists have questioned their identification with particular political parties, having come to believe that “no political party or group was adequate enough for the demands of the ordinary people” (Ayesha, April 2014). These activists are enquiring into action that could connect more deeply to ‘the people’, such as building grassroots movements and engaging in localised social action when in Egypt itself.

7.3.3 Participating in ‘people-based politics’

One approach to enacting ‘people-based’ politics is to take action within communities in Egypt. For example, Dina explains that she will, for now, engage by being active in supporting the poor and vulnerable, who she knows through her own networks in Cairo:

I decided to be pragmatic because the alternative is to be frustrated and I can't be frustrated all the time. Being pragmatic means I tried to deliver what I can from where I can at the right time, so even by trying to outreach to people in Cairo or getting more experience to offer back home when the time comes. I don't offer any slogans. I think we've over consumed this phase already. It's not going to lead you anywhere. So very silently and very individually I tried to direct my attention to the unprivileged when I am back home so it is all within my network. You know you can't help everybody. It's like you know people who have heart diseases and they can't get to hospital or they don't have the food you know it's simple stuff, they have deteriorated over time and they can't afford anything not even to think about democracy. So yeah, that's where I am right now: extreme pragmatist, realist (Dina, March 2014).

By noting that she takes this action because the alternative - participating in demonstrations and social movement activism aligned to a particular group and ideology - has become too frustrating, Dina shows that the struggle has created activists with various trajectories. In a context that has become increasingly dangerous for activists (see Dunne 2015), people are participating in the way they can; in some cases this means
'silently and individually'. Although not all would say they have become ‘realists’, it is clear that some activists have adapted their activism based on an understanding of what they think is possible in a given context.

After the experiences of 25 January, some secular activists reported withdrawing from activist groups and political organisations (in Egypt and the UK) in order to be able to think more carefully about where things went wrong. They suggest that gaining distance from organised groups and political parties is necessary, because being in a political party makes it “impossible to see the political game…to have a critical perspective on things” (Ayesha, April 2014). Having come to this conclusion through observing the political situation post-25 January, Ayesha goes on to say she will no longer be part of a formal political organisation, suggesting she has learned about the importance of being able to think independently and not being shaped by the ideas of the movement:

I don't think I'll ever be a member of a political party. It is very difficult because party wants to have a vision and defend its vision…I feel that in political parties you proselytise, you have to play games, which I would not be able to do (Ayesha, April 2014).

Some activists who identified with the Revolutionary Socialists struggled with the organisation’s decision to endorse Morsi in the 2012 election. Underlying some of the reflections was the suggestion that, in Egypt at least, formal political organisations are, no matter how well-intentioned, are susceptible to co-optation and the liberal paradigm that seeks power. An important outcome of questioning politics, democracy and the role of political parties within the revolution relates to the role of political parties in creating social change.

In period around the 2014 election, in particular, activists assessed and critiqued the various institutions and processes that shape politics and democracy more broadly. For example, learning that democracy, in its dominant liberal and representative form, failed the Egyptian people because political parties can be co-opted and controlled by state forces led Sana to critically engage with the types of structures needed to continue the struggle:
It’s not about looking towards being organised in political parties. Maybe, yes, we do want to be organised into revolutionary groups but not political parties that the state can control or manipulate (Sana, July 2014).

As Sana critically reflects on the role of political parties and suggests there may be alternative forms of organisation yet to be defined, she reinforces the importance of creativity and imagination within processes of learning for progressive social change. By participating in organised groups within the revolution, Sana is developing a political imagination, learning about other political possibilities through the critique, and rejection, of the dominant system that places social change in the realm of organised political parties. Importantly, Sana’s reflection demonstrates the necessity of research that examines learning in struggle and its implications because it can help to understand activists trajectories: recognising what activists learn is a key dimension of understanding how learning is translated into action in a specific moment and in the future. Sana shows she has learned within the group, and is learning to think about creating change through ‘alternative’ and imaginative forms of group action.

Even people who had been engaged with political parties for many years prior to the revolution have questioned the limitations of depending on political parties that are guided by particular ideologies. Reflecting on the failures of parties within the revolution and continuing struggle raised, for many activists, important questions about how political parties should engage with ‘the people’:

On the personal level I don’t think I want to be in a political party anymore. Yes. This is the result that I have reached. Even though I am a member of [anonymised], officially, but I am not doing anything with them really because the revolution has opened my eyes to this popular aspect of politics, the popular aspect of it. And I am not sure that the discourse of the Left is capable of engaging with or responding to this movement. I just feel that it is a moment of uncertainty for me to be in an organised political party. What I want to do is sit for a while until I come to grips with my understanding of the situation at least. I am really trying very hard to think about this but I don’t want to cheat myself and
just be with the political group and pretend to be active when I’m not into it… I have more faith in the younger generation because they have fresh outlooks and new eyes, away from the ideologies (Amira, April 2014).

By questioning the role of political organisations, reflecting on what democracy means and how to bring about change, many activists have questioned whether their continued participation in the struggle would be associated with a particular organisation. For some like Amira, this reflection has resulted in quiet withdrawal from organised movements and political groups and shows that, while some are newly politicised and see the benefit of working in groups, others have gained a deeper engagement with alternative conceptions of democracy and are beginning to interrogate the shape of their own future political engagement and action.

This section has provided evidence of the connections between learning in struggle and activists’ continued engagement with politics and processes of social change. As they continue to learn, reflect and engage, they create new political imaginations and show that, whatever their attitude towards voting, political parties or participating in social activism and organised movements, Egyptians have been impacted significantly: they have been ‘politically’ engaged in struggle (Simon and Klandermans 2014) and politically ‘socialised’ (Beaumont 2010, 2011) by the events since 25 January 2011. Activists have learned that politics in Egypt needs to be closer to ‘the people’ rather than relying on ineffective political institutions such as political parties and elections that reduces democracy to a single moment on election-day. The implications of this learning are important: activists have questioned the political structures in which they are able to participate. By rejecting these structures, they are adapting to the changing political context and reflecting on how they can engage in creating social and political change in new or different ways.

7.4 Conclusions: Developing commitment for future action?

Measuring the extent to which a person is impacted by participating in social action is difficult (Mansbridge 1995) but that should not mean we shy away from exploring the
connections. While exploring the connections between learning and the potential for social transformation “is not to romanticise [the learning…], it is to recognise its nature and importance” (Foley 1999:23). As I draw the findings from this chapter together, it is important to remember that there could be many other factors that could explain why a person’s view of the world changes, or their decision to participate in new or different ways.

Activism can have a lasting emotional impact on the people who participate, prompting continued engagement and participation in struggle. I illustrated different ways in which activists justify their commitment to participating in the continuing struggle. The relatively few studies of activist commitment within social movements have established that, as well as feeling empowered and having deeper social ties, “increased understanding and empathy often motivate them [activists] to continue their activism” (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013:198). It is clear that activists, through participating in social action, have been empowered and have gained a sense of their own agency as actors who can create social change, though how they enact that agency may vary significantly. Participating in social and political activism resulted in activists developing connections to other activists, and creating groups and organisations through which they mobilise(d). As well as having collective identities associated with particular groups, the activists are motivated by “intimate and emotional connections” (Featherstone 2008:38) to the ‘imagined community’ of Egypt (Anderson 1983). Feelings of solidarity towards Egypt and other activists, and commitment to the idea of social change, manifested for most activists in a commitment to future action.

Learning in social action enables people to develop skills for activism and leads to the expansion of their ‘activist capital’ (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013). By reflecting on the successes and failures of their actions, shifting their focus towards raising awareness among the British public, anti-coup activists developed skills for activism and adapted their strategies. They demonstrate that activists develop the capacities to reflect on their practices and adapt where necessary. Secular activists also reflected on their future participation, deciding it was necessary to build a grassroots movement within Egypt and learn from the ‘failures’ of the revolution to connect more closely to ‘the people’. The skills for activism learned through participating, therefore, are practical and theoretical:
responding to set-backs, challenges and a changing context, activists learn to connect how they engage to the reasons why they participate in a particular way.

Participating in the Egyptian struggle has impacted how and why activists engage with procedural dimensions of politics and democracy, in particular processes related to elections and lobbying. Many activists have learned the role and possible value of lobbying UK MPs as a strategy to continue to challenge Egyptian military rule, and have developed a new-found interest in UK politics. This is particularly interesting in light of Aly’s (2015) conclusion that ‘Arabs in London’ are more likely to engage in political developments in their ‘home’ country rather than in the UK. It reiterates the importance of continuing to examine the implications of social movement participation on activists’ trajectories. How activists choose to participate in Egyptian elections - whether they boycott, spoil their ballot or vote a particular way - is shaped by the context. Anti-coup activists boycotted the 2014 election in protest at Morsi’s continued detention. Revolutionaries offered a wide range of justifications for their decisions whether to or how to vote in each election. There is clear disaffection with politics in Egypt and ‘democracy’ as an idea in its current form: activists have concluded that politics - in both the formal and informal senses - needs to move closer to ‘the people’.

The shape and dimension of how activists continue or intend to engage with the Egyptian revolution and politics more broadly as a result of their participation during and since the 25 January revolution is highly personal and raises questions of identity and how it shapes perspectives of, and engagement with, understandings of how social happens and what that change should look like. For example, revolutionaries, who are arguably engaging in the most intense critical reflection, explain they are stepping back from collective action to think more carefully about what happened and what to do next. Along with some of the younger anti-coup activists, they demonstrate the intensity of learning in social action and reinforce its continuing nature: the fact activists’ reflections continued to be so intense throughout and beyond the research period also suggests conclusions drawn about some elements of activists’ trajectories (for example, commitment to a particular group or action) must be treated tentatively - as the situation in Egypt continues to unfold, they may retreat from or become more committed to future action.
In the next chapter I connect all three aspects of learning - how, what and with what effect - to analyse the theoretical imperative of conceptualising learning in struggle. I explore the theoretical implications of the research and outline the contribution to understandings of social movement learning and social change by demonstrating the cyclical, cumulative and continuing nature of learning in struggle.
CHAPTER EIGHT: (UN)LEARNING IN STRUGGLES FOR PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL CHANGE?

We have to search for the conversations and thoughts, but I don’t know how to… Khaled Abdalla. Cairo. 8 March 2015.

The aim of this research was to understand learning in struggles for social change, and to contribute to the conceptualisation of social movement learning as a site and process of education that might lead to progressive social change. Chapter Two outlined the theoretical context of the research. Drawing on critical theories of social change, I argued that there must be greater understanding of how learning in social movements can create political imaginations of a better, more socially-just world. Recognising that more can be understood about the role of social activism in processes of social change by looking less at what movement activists do and more at how they think (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), critical adult educators embarked on enquiries that would establish a small but growing field referred to as social movement learning. Building on critical pedagogues who highlighted critical reflection and consciousness as key to understanding how ordinary people can reflect on the world and create progressive social change, studies of learning within social movements and social action established that activists experience important, potentially transformative learning, though gaps in the conceptualisation of social movement learning remain (Foley 1999; Hall and Turay 2006; Von Kotze 2012).

This thesis builds on understandings of how activists are impacted by participating in a social movement and simultaneously responds to the above noted gaps in the conceptualisation of social movement learning. Studies of social movements demonstrate that participating in a movement increases activists’ sense of empowerment, level of empathy and inclination to participate in further action. While these are important insights into the impact of movement participation on the people who struggle for social change, this research takes the question of impact further by specifically examining the implications of learning within a movement. A further contribution responds to gaps noted by Hall and Turay (2006) in their ‘state of the field’
review of social movement learning. In this review, Hall and Turary highlighted, among other missing areas of exploration, the need for greater understanding of the effects of social movement learning, including how learning in social movements impacts activists behaviours, attitudes and habits. This thesis contributes directly to this knowledge. I use a pedagogical framework to look more deeply at why people might feel more empowered, have more empathy or commitment to social action. In doing so, I uncover the connections between activism, processes and content of learning, and future engagement.

This chapter brings three dimensions of learning - process, outcomes and implications - together to present a framework for conceptualising learning and unlearning in struggles for social change. I question the extent to which learning in struggle creates understandings of, and engagement with, progressive social change. In doing so, I create and contribute a conceptualisation of what I have called “(un)learning”. This is a new way of understanding the relationship between learning as acquisition and unlearning as the conscious ‘letting go’ of previous ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’. (Un)learning, as a concept, opens up new ways to understand and theorise the symbiotic nature of learning and unlearning in struggle.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, I briefly summarise the key findings from each empirical chapter. I then draw on the theoretical framework established in Chapter Two to argue that activism is an important process through which people learn and, importantly, unlearn about, and to create, progressive social change. I develop the conceptualisation of social movement learning through a number of cross-cutting themes: critical reflection and consciousness; unlearning as a process of creating and surrendering particular ‘truths’; learning and unlearning through the lived experience; and, the role of emotion and division associated with struggle. In the next chapter, I conclude the thesis by reflecting on how this conceptualisation of social movement learning can contribute to theories of social change more broadly.
8.1 Overview of findings

Activists engaged in many activities to demonstrate their commitment to, or belief in, the revolution and to bring about social change in Egypt. They attended demonstrations and sit-ins, organised events and protests, and participated in discussion and debate online. In order to better understand the significance of activists’ learning in this context, I present a brief summary of the findings in relation to the specific aspects of the overall research question: *In what ways and with what effect does activism impact understandings of and engagement with processes of social change?* In the remainder of the chapter, I reflect on the broader theoretical impulse of this research, learning and unlearning for progressive social change.

*Research question 1: How do activists learn by participating in social action?*

This question, addressed in Chapter Five, examined the processes through which activists learn when participating in social action, whether within an organised social movement, attending sit-ins, demonstrations, protests or campaign events, or in social action related to the continuing struggle for social change. I explored group and individual action, and presented processes of learning from both perspectives. I showed that activists learn and unlearn through group activity and individual, personal, and self-directed enquiries. Group activities involve debates, discussion and the lived pedagogical experience of protest, demonstration and social action.

Learning in social action is a cumulative and continuing process of enquiry, reflection, analysis and critique that involves learning and unlearning. The processes are entwined: activists experience moments where new insights prompt or provoke new enquiries, sometimes self-directed and individual, and at other times with others. Struggles for social change can involve emotional interactions, experiences and events, which are sometimes violent and distressing, sometimes positive and empowering. These events can provoke confusion, challenge and discomfort, but also lead to new enquiries and processes of theorising. By ‘standing back’ to reflect and critically engage with their conversations, observations, experiences and enquiries, activists gain new or deeper understandings. The activists make connections between different knowledge that continues the learning process: new or different questions and perspectives emerge at
Activists demonstrate that social action and social movements generate learning processes where people can engage with others and begin their own path of enquiry to better understand the world and imagine a different reality.

Research question 2: In what ways does learning in social action shape activists’ conceptualisation of social change?

This question sought to understand the extent to which participating in social action impacts the way people understand the world and how it changes their perspective of the kind of world they want to create. Focusing on the content of learning, therefore, Chapter Six provided evidence of activists’ learning about and for progressive social change.

Through their participation - whether in an organised movement, or through social action within their own networks and communities - activists gained new or deeper knowledge and developed their perspectives on various topics related to social change. They explored social justice, democracy and the role and shape of political structures and processes that administer social change. The Egyptian case study provides further evidence of the significant potential of learning in social action as a continuous process whereby people learn and unlearn about power. Importantly, activists show that, even if they had been previously engaged in political action, participating in struggle exposed what one of the activists I interviewed described as the “mystical forests” (Faoud, August 2014) within Egypt: activists navigated ‘old truths’ to uncover different understandings. Through social action, activists learn about power relations that lead to injustice, inequality, oppression and division. They reflect on ideas of social justice and critique ‘ballot-box’ conceptualisations of democracy. Building on these critical reflections, activists develop a broader, normative framework that seeks meaningful participation of the people within a society and the relations between them, not a procedural one that simply administers relations between the people and the state.

Learning in social action shapes the way activists understand what kind of world they live in (unjust, unequal and undemocratic) and the vision they have for society in the future. While some activists learned to imagine a future that reflects key messages of
progressive social change - respect for difference, a pluralist, agonistic and participatory understanding of democracy; and a life characterised by freedom and equality - problematic divisions remain in Egypt. As I go on to reflect upon in this chapter, despite them developing a vision of democracy as a ‘utopia’, secular revolutionaries, Islamist and anti-coup activists, and the nationalists are fiercely divided and have struggled to unlearn discourses that create fear of the ‘other’, raising important questions about the extent to which learning in struggle can lead to progressive social change.

Research question 3: In what ways does learning in social action impact activists’ engagement with processes of social change?

The third research question looks at the effects of learning in social action to explore the potential connections between learning about social change through activism and activist trajectories. Focusing on how activists have been impacted personally and socially, Chapter Seven argued that learning in social action is a productive process that has transformative potential for the individuals who are motivated to participate in different processes of social and political change.

Through their participation, and by gaining new knowledge about, and perspectives of, the way the world is and should be, activists changed personally and socially, gaining a sense of their own agency. They become conscious of the strategies they can use to create change, and understand the power that comes from being with others in physical spaces (such as Tahrir Square) where their resistance can also become symbolic. Although many admitted to feeling despondent as the revolution descended into coup and counter-revolution in 2013, people created social ties and established networks with other activists from which they felt empowered. Socially, and in their practices as activists and political participants, they have consciously questioned and debated their decisions to participate in, or boycott, formal political processes such as elections and referendums, and have adapted how they participate in social and political change. Activists differentiated between the ‘formal and informal’ nature of political engagement. They participate, or intend to, in informal politics through engaging with social movements or activist groups and organisations, or through individual social action within their communities. I demonstrated the difference between anti-coup activists who relied more on group action and secular activists who, since 2013,
retreated from organised social movement activism to find other ways in which to engage in reflection and political debate, and to contribute to the struggle actively. Engagement with formal politics - particularly the question of whether to vote in, or boycott, an election - was highly personal. Having learned about the different political processes, anti-coup activists, in particular, adapted their movement strategies by turning to lobbying and awareness raising actions within the UK while secular activists have, on the whole, become disillusioned with political parties and a version of democracy that centres on formalised processes such as elections.

8.1.2 What is (un)learning?

In the remainder of this chapter, I bring together the three empirical dimensions of the research (processes, outcomes and implications). In doing so, I contribute to the conceptualisation of social movement learning. I examine learning: the gaining new or deeper knowledge, and developing skills or capacities (Illeris 2007; Vanwynsberghe and Herman 2015). I also explore unlearning - processes of questioning assumptions and truths and, ultimately, the conscious “abandoning or giving up of knowledge, ideas or behaviours” (Hislop, Bosley, Coombs and Holland 2014:542), a process underexplored in studies of social movement learning but that is theoretically useful within the Egyptian case. One of the central contributions of this thesis is that, as well as highlighting the distinct characteristics of learning and unlearning separately, I develop the (intentionally parenthesised) concept of ‘(un)learning’ to theorise their important intersections. To be clear on these distinctions, I understand learning as acquisition, unlearning as conscious ‘letting go’ of ‘truth’, and (un)learning as the symbiotic relationship between the two.

The conceptualisation of (un)learning in struggle that I develop in this chapter contributes to knowledge by bringing together literature that has largely remained separate. Forging connections between social movement studies, social movement learning, adult education and organisational learning, (un)learning raises five theoretical questions for further investigation. One question relates to the intersection of intentionality, receptivity and consciousness. Learning something new can be incidental whereas unlearning requires the conscious retreat from a particular understanding, but how are the two related? Is one a precursor to the other, and to what extent must learners
be consciously receptive to a different ‘truth’ to be able to unlearn? Second, the depth of (un)learning is an issue that requires further exploration to understand the extent to which new or different understandings are superficial and in the moment or exemplify a profound shift that sustains change. Third, (un)learning draws attention to what knowledge is lost or replaced through activism – the specific content of the ‘truths’ that are discarded as a result of being part of a movement for change. Fourth, (un)learning invites questions of the specific characteristics of social movement participation that enable or facilitate learning and unlearning. A final question raised through this discussion concerns the extent to which learning in struggle leads to progressive understandings of the way the world could be and what this might mean for theories of social change.

8.2 Becoming critically conscious

This research builds on the contribution of adult educators and critical pedagogues to explore learning processes associated with, and implications of, developing a critical consciousness. Foley (1999:103) argues that, “for people to become involved in social movements, something must happen to their consciousness - they must see that action is necessary and possible”. While this may explain what motivates people to join a movement (a significant focus of studies of social movements, see Chapter Two, section 2.2), it is also pertinent to understanding why people participate in struggle and how, through this experience, their critical consciousness continues to develop and their participation is sustained. Critical adult educators like Foley are informed by the Freirean concept of conscientization whereby becoming critically conscious of the problem of their material reality leads the oppressed to take action (Freire 1970). However, much less attention is given to the conceptualisation of how people become critically conscious, and less again of the implications of this consciousness.

Scholars of social movement learning demonstrate that activists learn through activities such as discussion and debate, listening and critical reflection and that, through participating in action for social change, activists gain new or deeper knowledge and acquire skills for future action (see Chapter Two, section 2.3). However, rather than adding further evidence of how social movement practices such as debates and
demonstrations contribute to learning, this thesis takes a different approach, theorising how activism prompts critical reflection, develops critical consciousness and enables participants to form a critical imagination of a better world that, importantly, they then act upon. The remainder of the chapter draws on and develops some of the ideas introduced in this section.

8.2.1 Theorising through temporal and spatial distance

In the Freirean sense, critical reflection refers to theoretical analysis (Freire 1970) that is explicit in its political and ideological underpinnings and intention to remove structures of oppression (see Freire and Macedo 1999). Informal learning through participation in activism enables activists to understand the why of their actions, whilst also assessing the possible consequences of the resulting action (Mezirow 1990). This reflection can take place in the moment, incidentally and without intentionality, or after the event retrospectively. In her exposition of consciousness raising within learning groups, Hart (1990) argues that reflecting critically requires putting distance between the subject and the experience in order to expose aspects of the world that are hidden from view. Similar to the notions of learning through ‘theorising’ and ‘standing back’ noted by Bateson (1994) and Foley (1999), critical reflection occurs through distance. Foley (1999:50) establishes “the creative paradox of consciousness raising work: personal experience is its necessary point of departure, but for critical consciousness to emerge people must gain theoretical distance from their subjective experience”. This research contributes a more specific conceptualisation of the notion of theorising as a process of (un)learning. I do this by demonstrating that ‘theorising’ through theoretical distance can emerge in two ways: temporally and spatially.

This research takes further Bateson’s (1994:53) recognition that “certainties fluctuate over time”, and that the experiences and certainties of life can be viewed in many ways once there is a “willingness to question what has been taken for granted”. I show that time enables critical reflection in two ways. First, each event - pedagogical moment – adds to a growing body of evidence of a particular issue, such as corruption related to SCAF. These events can happen over a short or long period of time. Second, temporal distance from an event enables intellectual enquiry - to find documents, read widely and critically, discuss the events with others and continue investigations. In both instances,
(un)learning is cumulative. For example, Faoud (August 2014) described feeling as if he was “staring into mystical forests”, not really knowing “how things worked”. As Faoud sought new and deeper understandings in order to navigate the confusion through self-directed learning and critical reflection, he deepened his understanding of the connections between different institutions (such as the judiciary, media and international financial institutions) that had deeply embedded relationships to SCAF - the ancien regime. Activists theorised these connections by asking questions, gathering more or different knowledge, looking for answers in texts and books. Theorising was a process through which activists became critically conscious of how structures within the Egyptian system benefited certain groups, and that those who are marginalised economically, socially and politically, are further isolated because of the power relations that constrain their freedoms and opportunities. Although many of the situations associated with the Egyptian struggle were intensely challenging, activists’ continued motivation to understand them theoretically illustrates the cumulative and continuing change in intellectual state: the challenge of the ‘mystical forest’ was pedagogically productive and shows that deeper, more critical, understanding can result in politicisation and the motivation to take action.

Time provides activists with a critical distance from particular events that enables them to make connections that create critical consciousness. Critical reflection, therefore, is not an immediate process: while there can be sudden moments that contribute to learning and unlearning, the passing of time inspires cumulative (un)learning. Furthermore, these cumulative processes suggest that learning for progressive social change requires conscious engagement and receptivity: for example, when activists embarked on self-directed enquiry seeking deeper understandings of a situation, they reveal an openness to ‘new’ knowledge and a diminishing attachment to ‘old’ truths. In sum, temporal distance is an enabling condition through which activists (un)learn.

This research builds on work by Hart (1990) and Foley (1999) that show distance between the subject and experience enables the ‘theorising’ process that is essential for critical reflection. Taking the notion of ‘theorising’ further by distinguishing between the different types of theoretical ‘distance’, this research shows that spatial distance is also an important pedagogical process: Egyptians living in the UK talked about feeling more able to critically reflect on what they had seen and been part of when they gained
physical distance from Egypt. Heba (May 2014) commented that, because daily life in Egypt was stressful and tense, “they are at the end of their nerves, they are nervous wrecks, so [being in the UK] you are more sane and better able to analyse”. Theories of learning in social action emphasise the importance of placing learning in its context because it highlights the dynamic and rich learning that can happen within different spaces. However, this research extends the question of context by demonstrating that it is also a factor when people step away from that context. In other words, (un)learning takes place both within and in retreat from the context.

Theorising as a processes of developing critical consciousness can happen retrospectively, not just in a specific moment. For people who were already engaged in the struggle for progressive social change in Egypt, for example engaging with the positions of Kefaya or the Revolutionary Socialists, their critical consciousness was not complete. Even those who had been thinking about progressive social change before the 25 January revolution continued to reflect on what they saw, the different perspectives that they heard and the new information that they had gathered. They also developed a deeper critical consciousness of previous knowledge. For instance, through learning in the context of a movement for change, activists were becoming more critically conscious of power, in particular the relations within Egypt that prevented SCAF from being challenged. Activists were, as Sana noted, creating a “critical stance”. Similarly, people who were new to participating in struggles experienced a particular moment that shifted their consciousness and led them to act, but through their actions they became more critically engaged and conscious of the ways in which power, ideas and knowledge (see Freire 1972; Foucault 1982) were used to pit people in Egypt against each other. Critical consciousness, therefore, is not just a concept to apply to theorise why people participate but is also an important factor to consider how and why they continue to participate.

8.2.2 Receptivity: a precursor to becoming critical?

It is important to be explicit about the critical dimension of consciousness because it reinserts the normative imagination into theories of social change: just as Davies (2014) argued extremist ideas can be learned, some learning in social action is critical and therefore aligned with progressive social change, while some learning is not. Differentiating between learning and critical learning in the Egyptian case, and
acknowledging that activists’ understandings developed throughout the struggle in response to new information or events, for example, also reveals the continuous nature of learning in processes of social change. Activists arrive to a movement at different stages of their critical consciousness: some are receptive to the challenge of navigating through the ‘mystical forest’; others may be aware that the forest conceals challenges they feel unable to face; in some instances, people are unwilling to acknowledge there is anything hidden or unknown. In the Egyptian struggle, secular and anti-coup activists experienced moments that propelled them to find a path to critical consciousness, while many nationalists (during 2014) had not. Consequently, this research shows that the normative political imagination of progressive social change cannot be taken for granted: it must be made visible by exploring cases of learning in social movements where progressive ideas of social change are learned, and include cases when they are not.

The divisions within Egypt and, by extension, the nature of different groups’ learning, raises theoretical questions about the extent to which (un)learning requires receptivity and, subsequently, factors that determine that openness to new or different ideas and ‘truths’, including progressive notions of social change. The nationalist support for Sisi illustrates this further: when, in 2014, nationalists appeared settled on the idea of a ‘dictatorship democracy’, they show it may be extremely difficult to unlearn dominant discourses (and learn progressive ones) without learning about, and critically reflecting on, power relations and structures within society, and between the state and society. The nationalist support for Sisi and, by extension, SCAF, suggests there may be precursors to critical consciousness, a willingness to become critically conscious and therefore experience ‘unlearning’. In other words, is it possible for everyone to learn or unlearn, or are there factors that prevent people from being receptive to (un)learning? Thinking about receptiveness towards (un)learning raises issues of identity that go beyond the scope of this thesis but warrant further investigation. For instance, studies of transnational activism and diaspora politics have established identity as an important dimension of movement participation (see Sheffer 2003; Lyons and Mandeville 2010), though it has not specifically been connected to activists’ learning within a social movement. Similarly, it has been shown that identities vary in strength (Huddy 2001) but questions remain about the extent to which identification with a particular position shapes activists’ receptivity or capability to learn or unlearn particular knowledge or ‘truths’.
8.3 Creating and ‘letting go’ of ‘truth’

Critically engaging in the struggle - whether in the moment with others or retrospectively - enabled many activists to learn new information, deepen their understanding of the struggle and develop a critical perspective of social change that they would then act upon. However, as the Egyptian struggle continued and turned into a counter-revolution in 2013, it became clear that it was not enough to understand learning as acquisition. In an increasingly prohibitive and violent political space, divisions among the different political strands were rife and, to find a way forward and an alternative future to military rule under SCAF, the ‘truth’ of what many activists believed required them to consciously reject previously held beliefs or ideas: they also had to unlearn.

In his framework of learning in social action, Foley (1999) argues that activism enables the unlearning of dominant discourses. Having established the significant power of discourses to oppress, it was clear that the concept of unlearning could be hugely important to this research because it introduces the “critical process of weighing previously acquired beliefs when confronting new ones” (Soto Crespo 1999:43, cited in MacDonald 2002:172). However, the conceptualisation of unlearning lacked depth in its explanation of how and what activists unlearn when they engage in struggles for social change. This section develops the theorisation of unlearning by furthering my concept of (un)learning: I show that learning and unlearning are processes that are related, that activists (un)learn discourses by reflecting on events and that the retrospective nature of (un)learning shows the pedagogical process is continuous. I use the terms ‘letting go’, surrender and relinquish to reflect the turbulent nature of unlearning: the conscious retreat from a particular truth. These terms intentionally emphasise unlearning as a more emotional and disorderly process for activists than deconstruction or rejection: to ‘let go’ or relinquish a truth may be a process of gradual, cumulative retreat that involves difficulty and disconcertion. They suggest that some ‘truths’ are more difficult to let go of than others.

8.3.1 (Un)learning by reflecting on events
Adult educators established the learning potential of moments that produce a disorienting dilemma (Lange 2004). In response to everyday moments of 'disjuncture', a person's understanding is "no longer in harmony with the world" and they "have to find new explanations, new knowledge, new ways of doing things" (Jarvis (2009:1-2). This research calls attention to events associated with participating in struggle that can prompt the disjuncture between what activists had previously thought (or perceived to be ‘true’) and what they were observing. Such disparities present activists with evidence that is confusing. For many, the gulf between what they ‘knew’ and what they saw was the trigger for participation, critical reflection and the process of (un)learning. Dilemmas emerging from observing and witnessing violent events forced activists to confront whether to continue to believe the 'truth' or to respond to their doubts and seek an alternative understanding.

In their reflection of the uprisings during the 25 January revolution, Gunning and Baron (2013:235-237) note that violence perpetrated by the police was instrumental in leading some activists to “overcome their fears” and contributed to the revolution’s “moral battery”. Although this provides useful context, it does not dissect the process of overcoming fear or in this instance explain why people no longer felt afraid of the Egyptian police, despite observing violence that had visibly impacted so many people. It also fails to suggest why not being afraid of the police or other embodiments of state power is a crucial dimension of progressive social change. Activists reflected on incidents such as the use of water canons against a lone protester during the 18 days, the Battle of the Camel, the Blue Bra incident or the Raba’a massacre. These events involved people being beaten, disappeared, shot at or killed by some element of the state’s security forces. Even though the protests were sparked by the brutal murder of Khaled Said, most Egyptians were shocked to see demonstrators treated in this way by the police or the army. Analyses of the Egyptian struggle have established that activists were angered and confused by these events, but it is the concept of (un)learning developed in this thesis that explains how confusion and intense emotion can become a productive force that leads to overcoming fear: (un)learning exposes how activists become critically conscious of the structures that prevent progressive social change, in this case understanding that state institutions such as the police enable SCAF to rule by fear. During the struggle activists were exposed to new, often violent and dangerous, situations of which they had to try to understand and make sense.
In this research, an interaction or event becomes a pedagogical moment to (un)learn a particular ‘truth’ when activists use the temporal and spatial distance to reflect on its content, significance or implications. For example, in the aftermath of the 30 June protests and violence following the Morsi ‘coup’ in 2013, activists sought alternative truths by finding specific information that could help them to understand how the situation unfolded in the way it did, why people reacted apparently with joy that so many people had been killed or blamed Morsi supporters themselves for the massacres, and to consider what they could and should do next. A year after the events of 2013 when Sisi was inaugurated as president, activists were still seeking information that would explain how SCAF return to power and the ‘truth’ that only military rule could respond to the threat of terrorists and foreigners (see Chapter Five, Section 5.2). Foucault (1980) showed power and discourse are key to understanding how ‘knowledge’ is established as ‘truth’. Acquiring knowledge about the invisibility of power is clearly an important dimension of learning in struggle but it becomes more important through the recognition that disintegration of ‘truth’ depends on critical engagement with alternative knowledge acquired from reflecting on and theorising intensely shocking and emotional events. Having established reflection can happen at the time of an event or conversation, the next section demonstrates that these reflections can also occur retrospectively.

8.3.2 Retrospective confrontation of ‘truth’

In a period of change like the Egyptian revolution, activists are exposed to a range of events and conversations that can have implications for the way they respond to or understand the struggle. These pedagogical episodes include moments that the activist experiences as an individual, and events in the struggle that become part of the revolution’s publicly historicised narration, which activists interpret collectively and individually. For example, engaging in conversations that expose people to a different viewpoint (this may have been with a taxi driver, someone at a demonstration who they might not have previously talked to, or a member of their family). Similarly, observing events such as the Battle of the Camel or the Raba'a massacre (see Chapter Four, section 4.2) left indelible marks on how the struggle was narrated and historicised. Activists confronted their understandings in the moment and sometimes in conversations with others in the weeks and months that followed.
Through interacting with others or witnessing particular events, activists gain and seek new or different knowledge. Whether occurring incidentally at the time of the event or conversation, or consciously through retrospective reflection, activists (un)learn by confronting a particular 'truth'. Theorising the violence associated with the regime (for example, incidents like the Battle of the Camel, the Maspero and Raba'a massacres, and the continued detention of political prisoners under Sisi's government) deepened the body of evidence that challenged a previously established 'truth' – namely that the army were protectors of the people. When activists theorise the connection between events, they show that, although unlearning can be sudden (Rushmer and Davies 2004), events associated with struggles for social change are not interpreted or understood in isolation, or simply in the moment. Studies of informal learning established that people can experience a "retrospective recognition" of their learning (Schugurensky 2005a:5) – acknowledging their acquisition of knowledge or change in understanding. This research takes this further by drawing out the cumulative and continuing nature of (un)learning in the informal context of a social movement, an underexplored aspect of social movement learning. Activists may not always be conscious of the importance of an incident at the time but, through continued critical reflection and self-directed enquiries, they show (un)learning in struggle is a retrospective, and therefore, continuing process.

Making connections between a series of incidents or events, each disconcerting or troubling in their own way, activists demonstrate that learning in struggle is on-going and cumulative: each event or incident increases doubt in the dominant discourse and, subsequently, intensifies the proclivity to engage in reflection and action (in the tradition of Dewey, Freire and Gramsci). On-going engagement, critique and enquiry, and the cumulative effects of lived experience, retrospective reflection and the continued search for an alternative knowledge, are essential processes that lead to the unravelling of discourses that had been established as 'truth' and lead to 'conscientization' – the commitment to future action.

8.4 Living as (un)learning
Stressing experience as a generator of consciousness, Marx established that “ideas and concepts arise from relations between people and their material world… our consciousness is actively produced within our experience of social, material and natural existence” (Allman 2001:37). In this section, I show that one way of (un)learning in struggle occurs through finding new ways of being - a form of prefiguration by living as if those social relations had already changed. In other words, for some Egyptians, activism enabled (un)learning because they embodied a different relationship with the people around them and representatives of the state, such as the police.

Many activists talked about the positive experiences they had during the struggle. The pluralist space of participating in activism prompted learning and unlearning, in particular learning about the positive interactions that are possible with people who hold different positions and unlearning negative and divisive discourses about certain parts of or groups within society. In Chapter Five (see Section 5.1), I showed that, by participating in the demonstrations and sit-ins during the 18 days, many activists learned by participating alongside people who were different from themselves. Sometimes they found common ground and understandings, they often debated points of disagreement; some found their preconceptions about particular groups - particularly the poor - were challenged. For example, secular activists spoke of gaining a deeper understanding of the struggle by talking with ‘anonymous people’ (Dina, March 2014) and many referred to Tahrir Square as ‘utopian’ because people from all backgrounds could come together and demonstrate side-by-side. In her theory of political socialisation, Beaumont (2011:219) argued young people learn through the “dissonance” and “disequilibrium of ‘collaborative pluralist contexts’ that disrupt how an individual views the world. Taking this notion further by highlighting rupture and unease within the activist experience, I argue that it is important to emphasise that challenge through difference prompts (un)learning. Pluralism can be educative when it forces the activist to engage critically with their position and the position of their opponents, and compels them to seek new information to corroborate or challenge their own established ideas, whether these are ideas about institutions, political leaders or other people within society.

While it is perhaps more intuitive to associate rupture and unease with negative events like the violence perpetrated against protesters, discussing violent events within a pluralist context can be a productive process through which to confront - and
subsequently learn and unlearn - perceptions about people. When Nour, for example, recounted his conversation with a man standing in Tahrir Square in 2013 holding up a sign of Nasser, he admitted that he did not expect him to have been able to offer such a nuanced critique of the revolution and understanding of the historical connection between the counter-revolution and Nasser’s rule. Confronting his own misconceptions about the capacities of poor, marginalised and oppressed Egyptians, Nour, like other activists, demonstrate the unique potential of pluralist activist spaces to generate ‘educative turbulence’ (Davies 2014). Whether these “pedagogical entry points” (Lange 2004:131) occurred in Tahrir Square in Cairo, on the seafront in Alexandria or outside the embassy in London or at the BBC buildings in Manchester, activists (un)learned through the experience of social activism that brought together people from across the social divide. Being forced to live a different perception of people was, for some, but not all, a challenging but important dimension of their (un)learning.

(Un)learning can also occur through the prefiguration of different power relations. For example, Eman learned not to be afraid of the police and was compelled to continue to struggle directly against them, living the relationship with the state the way she wanted it to be in the future (see section 7.1). When Eman learned about police brutality and consciously chose not to live in fear of the state’s security services, she unlearned the imaginary of the police as protectors. This prefiguration was a conscious process of unlearning that led to self-confidence. Substantiating my rejection of conceptualising or dismissing unlearning as ‘forgetting’ (see Chapter Two, Section 2.3.5), activists like Eman show that unlearning is a conscious, active process that requires the ‘learner’ to be present and critically engaged. (Un)learning, therefore, is the symbiotic process of discarding knowledge (a ‘truth’) and developing new perspectives, imaginations and new ‘truths’.

Conceptually, (un)learning reflects the indivisibility of unlearning one truth and enquiries that enable learning new ones. In this case, violent events prompted activists to learn about state institutions like the police and unlearn the power it had over them, and to use negative experiences to generate their feeling of empowerment. Building on the recognition that power can be found within ourselves (Rowlands 1997) and that it is not simply a negative force but can also be positive (Foucault 1994), (un)learning offers
theoretical avenues to explore how activism generates power within and to deepen the conceptualisation of empowerment within social movements.

8.5 The emotional dynamic of movement participation

Theories of social movements have, to some extent, examined the “complex cognitive and moral emotion” (Goodwin 2007:418) associated with activism but it is an area that remains underexplored, particularly in relation to its pedagogical potential. Proponents of cultural analyses of social movements argue emotions are significant for understanding why people participate in a movement (Jasper 1998; Goodwin, 2001; Goodwin 2004; Gould 2004). Emotions also explain why activists sustain their involvement by highlighting the ways in which activism generates attachment to the cause and between the people who participate (Juris 2008). Learning about the ‘collective strength’ that comes from creating common ground - the power with (Eyben 2005:22) and experiencing the emotional dimension of solidarity (see Featherstone 2012) manifests as “collective goals…to radically transform society” (Crowther, Martin and Shaw 2008:15). However, the potential links between the emotional dimension of activism and the implications for activists’ knowledge or understandings of the world require deeper examination, as I go on to do in the remainder of this section. A pedagogical approach offers scope for such investigations.

8.5.1 Passion and emotion as motivation

In this section, I highlight the emotional dimension of activism that continues to inspire people to participate. Activists reflected on the collective experience of participating in demonstrations, sit-ins and groups with others; about the friendships and bonds they formed with people at the sit-ins and demonstrations which enabled the creation of networks for future activism and political engagement; and about their increased attachment to Egypt. Attending demonstrations, in particular during the 18 days, increased activists’ sense of ‘belonging’ and many argued that they felt it was important to continue to struggle in order to achieve social justice, not just for their own lives but for people who were suffering in Egypt. Emotions - whether increased understanding of, and empathy with, the poor and marginalised or outrage at the actions of the state towards activists - produced pedagogical moments and created productive networks and
solidarities. Through these networks and solidarities, activists would, ultimately, learn from each other and deepen their attachment to the struggle. This concurs with the conclusions drawn by Van Dyke and Dixon (2013) who argue that solidarity and empathy are factors that increase commitment to activism. However, I go further by showing that the emotional and cognitive elements of activism also creates pedagogical networks for (un)learning that continues to inspire action, but also places boundaries on what is not learned by some.

Egyptians who have identified with the revolutionaries were particularly emotional when they reflected on what they perceived to be their ‘failures’ within the struggle. Although they also learned that revolution is a long process and that the Egyptian struggle is not over, they conveyed intense frustration and sadness that they had ‘failed’ when Egyptians elected another military general that restored the ancien régime. In other words, they failed because their revolution had been subsumed by a counter-revolution that they had not foreseen and therefore had been unable to stop. The effects of feeling such intense failure might explain why many revolutionaries have retreated from organised social movements as they try to find a way forward. It also reveals a possible reveal a weakening of the revolutionary resolve. While this may appear pessimistic, “failure or unsolvable problems usually force creative responses” (Buchen 1998, cited in MacDonald 2002:172). In Egypt, there was hope that “the people will find a way to come back and hopefully learn from all these terrible mistakes that we have made” (Amira, April 2014). Davies (2014:452) argued that turbulence is ‘educative’ because it can “spark creativity that rebuilds new landscapes”. As Amira suggests, negativity can be a productive force: engaging in action for an alternative future is, in essence, a pedagogical pursuit that emerges from positive and negative experiences of struggling for social change.

When activists reported that they were struggling to understand where they went wrong, they show that they are still part of the struggle, and that they are continuing the (un)learning process, despite its many challenges. As a prominent British-Egyptian activist told me in Cairo in 2015, the situation in Egypt felt like a huge wall was facing him and blocking his path to seeing a different future: while he couldn’t see how to get over it at that moment, he knew he had to keep finding a way. He highlighted that the task for revolutionaries who seek progressive social change is a continued struggle to
keep searching for the next steps – to not see the wall as insurmountable but to keep learning or unlearning in order to find a way in which it can be climbed over or torn down. His metaphor showed that the struggle for social change would be continued by revolutionary activists being creative in their political imagination: although finding a way to climb the wall or navigate the ‘mystical forest’ is challenging, through the process, activists gain skills in critique and self-reflection, and they learn to adapt and improvise to the developing situation and crises. A crucial dimension of (un)learning through perceived failure is learning to recognise what limits us - being critically conscious of power and the structures that prohibit both the way we perceive the way the world could be and the opportunities through which it can be changed. Such recognition is critical to (un)learning.

The emotional dimensions of participating in a movement for social change were evident in the activists’ accounts and have, to some degree, shaped how people participate and continue to engage in the continuing struggle. Some activists responded to particularly emotional (usually violent) events by engaging in individual enquiries to deepen their knowledge of the situation; others retreated from demonstrations in favour of participating in local action with poorer members of their community; for some, the violence made them less afraid and therefore more empowered to resist. In their investigation of activist commitment, Van Dyke and Dixon (2013:198) argue that the “intensive activist experience increases understanding of the issues and increases their empathy toward individuals who have been affected by a social situation” and subsequently sustains activism. Despite Egyptian activists’ trajectories being varied, the intensity of the revolutionary experience undoubtedly increased knowledge of, commitment and determination to continue. Activists portrayed a belief in the 18 days as a ‘utopia’ of hope and imagination, and of the Egyptian revolution as ‘unfinished’, a reflection that concurs with recent analyses of the revolution (see Shenker 2016, Marfleet 2016). As Amira (April 2014), concluded: “there has been a huge transformation, the impact will be in 20-30 years time”. A pedagogical approach takes the idea of activist commitment further by emphasising that cognitive change and emotion do not just relate to what people know but also concern the skills in critical reflection they develop along the way. The revolution continues because the activists continue to critically reflect on their experiences and observations, on the emotional experiences, the knowledge they created and the truths they unlearned. However, the next section illustrates that emotions
associated with movement participation and being part of a struggle for social change does not necessarily lead to learning: attachment can also prevent learning.

8.5.2 Pragmatism as not learning?

Through the concept of (un)learning, we can also reflect on whether some people do not learn through movement participation. Being based on the reflections of activists associated with different ‘sides’ of the struggle, this research demonstrates that particular subjectivities – often with an emotional underpinning - can shape what people learn or unlearn. It also suggests that some people are not learning ideas or in ways that might lead to progressive social change. This provides additional insights into processes of (un)learning. For example, activists associated with the revolutionary position (being against military rule) were seemingly predisposed to critically reflect on their experiences of the police and security services. They experienced learning moments and engaged in processes of critical reflection that enabled them to unlearn the discourses that had previously made them fearful or unwilling to challenge state institutions related to the military. In contrast, nationalists whose perspectives were embedded within narratives of the military as Egypt’s saviours did not learn to challenge their conception of the ‘truth’. Even those who were ‘pragmatic’ Sisi supporters (see Chapter Six), who understood military rule in Egypt had created deep divisions in the country, and knew that violence against civilians had been perpetrated in the name of ‘stability and security’ had not learned to question in ways that would enable them to look for alternatives. They had not learned deeply enough to have their perspectives challenged critically. When justifying their support of continued military rule, the ‘pragmatists’ suggest that some people are not learning because they lack the receptivity to unlearn particular discourses. In this case, there may be many reasons why even Sisi supporters who are sympathetic to the revolutionaries’ goals have not learnt about, or critically reflected on, the impact of continued military rule. In some instances, the emotional attachment to particular narrations of Egypt’s past prevents critical reassessment, while for others, fear of a different ‘other’, namely rule by Islamists, closes down opportunities for learning new or different ideas of social change. Unlearning powerful discourses of ‘stability and security’ appears to present a significant challenge for learning among nationalists in Egypt.
Considering not learning as related to (un)learning demonstrates that receptivity is critical to a theory of learning in struggle. Through examining what is not learned, we can see boundaries that constrain how we learn: there are subjectivities that prevent learning and unlearning. This research suggests being receptive and open to learning new or different ideas of the world is a particularly significant dimension of understanding learning in social movements because it not only shapes what we learn but can also enable us to question more deeply why some people might not be able to unlearn, or why some ideas and attitudes may be more difficult to part from than others. In the next section, I look more closely at what barriers to learning can tell us about processes of deep (un)learning.

8.5.3 Division and conflict for deep (un)learning?

In Egypt, populist politics has produced and sustained a nationalist discourse that promotes the military and SCAF as the purveyors of stability and security, the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists, and secular, revolutionary activists as foreign sponsored traitors (see Chapter Four, section 4.3). This form of securitised, populist politics depends on the portrayal of ‘the people’ as a collective identity and has created an intense fear of, and hostility towards, the ‘other’. The dominant discourse in Egyptian politics, media and society argues that you are either ‘with the people’ or against them. Despite many activists gaining new or deeper knowledge through their participation and becoming more emotionally ‘invested’ (see Nour) in the continuing struggle, theoretical questions arise from the division and the widespread view that Egypt needed the return of the military regime.

The aftermath of Mubarak’s resignation failed to meet any of the activists’ hopes and expectations, raising questions about the depth of (un)learning required for the new or different ideas developed in struggle to be sustained. If activists had really (un)learned through the ‘utopian’ pluralist experience of being united against Mubarak, and they had developed a sense of empathy for and solidarity with the people who demonstrated alongside them, how was it they could turn against each other so vehemently, particularly in the summer of 2013? Furthermore, if activists had learned to critique democracy, how was it that people who had protested against Mubarak and joined sit-ins throughout 2011 and 2012 were, by 2014, calling for a “benevolent dictatorship” that could ensure
“stability and security” (various interviews 2014)? The rifts in Egypt suggest that to fully break the habits of division would require a longer, more sustained prefiguration of the utopian pluralist alternative and of a deeper understanding of how divisive discourses enabled the counter-revolution. If Egyptians are to let go of their emotional connection to the divisive nature of the militarised discourse of ‘the Egyptian people’, they must part with - and grieve for - their attachment to Nasser and the military as the symbol of freedom from colonialism and to the discourses that keep them divided.

Analysing the Egyptian case through the concept of (un)learning and with insights from three different groups (nationalist, anti-coup and revolutionary) shows that future theories of learning that seek to explore implications of activism on future processes of social change must also consider the depth of (un)learning and the barriers that might prevent unlearning from occurring. This also reiterates the theoretical concerns of receptivity and identity, and the extent to which experiencing (un)learning depends on being willing to part with old truths and create new ones. Breaking with old ‘truths’ to overcome division is, as this research shows, clearly a challenge. However, a progressive conceptualisation of (un)learning in struggle would perceive challenge as a pedagogical opportunity. In the various examples provided in this chapter, I have drawn on conceptualisations of unlearning that are imbibed in terminology associated with emotion and inner struggle, and built on theories that show unlearning involves ‘turbulence’ (Davies 2014) and confrontation (Soto Crespo 1999, cited in MacDonald 2002). I referred to the tumultuous events in Egypt that presented activists and observers with many emotional and cognitive challenges, in particular violent events that forced activists to confront long-established ‘truths’, and highlighted the fierce divisions between the three main ‘groups’ – the nationalists, anti-coup/Islamists and secular/revolutionaries. In the next section, I reflect on theories of social change and, particularly through, radical theories of democracy to further my argument that, within a creative and progressive theory of social change, these divisions could hold pedagogical potential.

8.6 A pedagogical reflection on social change

The 18 days in 2011 marked the beginning of the continuing Egyptian revolution and a period of significant challenge for the activists who participated. In the four years since
Mubarak’s resignation, Egyptians have experienced numerous elections and referendums; strikes, mass demonstrations and uprisings; a coup d’état, massacres and a ‘counter-revolution’ that reinstated military rule. Through these tumultuous times, as this section details, activists’ perspectives on various dimensions of social change developed. In the section that follows, I conclude the thesis by reflecting more broadly on the research and its implications for understanding social movements and social change.

8.6.1 Rejecting the liberal paradigm

Critical theories of learning and education for social change (in particular, Freire 1970; Gramsci 1971; Allman 1999; Foley 1999; Holloway 2002) largely centre on Marx’s analysis of political economy. Strikingly, there are multiple ways in which Egyptians felt and interpreted the injustices of life under military rule; activists gained critical perspectives that exposed poverty and inequality as issues deeply connected to violent repression and social, religious, cultural and political exclusion. By reflecting on inequality and the many ways that people experience poverty, participating in the struggle generated opportunities to interrogate and subsequently develop arguments about the distribution of power rather than the distribution of wealth. The activists’ reflections on the underlying power structures and corrupt institutions that benefit elites show that learning for progressive social change depends on people being able to make connections between the struggles of everyday life and the broader structural issues of power. For many of the newly engaged Egyptians who participated in the revolution and continue to struggle for social change, 25 January was the beginning of a long process of personal growth and transformation. The struggle has generated pedagogical moments where people learned about power and experienced empowerment themselves: as activists reflected on the change they were able to effect during the 18 days, they learned that power can come from within and that people can gain strength from solidarity and the collective experience of creating change with others.

Learning in struggle also enables activists to develop understandings of how power is perpetuated through mechanistic, liberal interpretations of democracy within Egypt and at the global level through international financial institutions. Supporting Young’s (1990:25) position that justice concerns “how people live not what they possess”, Egypt’s activists show that when democratic theory and approaches to social change emphasise
possession and distribution they fail to expose structures and relations that constrain opportunities. For example, Khaled noted that, during the 18 days, activists in the square argued that they needed to stay at the sit-in and reject Mubarak’s suggestion of calling presidential elections because “accepting a compromise or backing off now would not solve the problem” (March 2014). By discussing the options presented to them in Mubarak’s speeches, revolutionaries explored democracy from a broader perspective that related to deeper, more structural problems. This research highlights activists’ rejection of liberal approaches to democracy that centre on the ‘ballot box’ and subsequently silence progressive alternatives that focus on ‘the people’. Ali, a secular activist, referred to democracy as a “sugar-coated lie” (May 2014) while Hany, a nationalist and Sisi supporter, argued that it “does not exist anywhere in this world” (May 2014). Anti-coup activists like Rana agreed, calling it “a façade”. This rejection, from activists on all ‘sides’ of the struggle demonstrates that the revolution has led to critical engagement with, and dismissal of, notions of liberal democracy.

While some activists suggested that they had shifted their political participation towards individual action at ‘the street’ level, many more indicated that they were committed to participating within movements and networks. Those activists who had not engaged in a movement for social change prior to 25 January developed a sense of their own personal agency and solidarity, and gained skills for further activism. They formed social ties with other politically engaged Egyptians, a factor that built commitment to the overall goal of social change and a connection to the movement’s collective identity. Recognising that 25 January and the continuing struggle politicised Egyptians and has led them to participate and engage in Egypt’s social and political development, whether individually, within informal networks or a specific group or movement, shows that learning in struggle has important implications for social change. While the Egyptian situation may be complex and beset with division, activists have gained many of the characteristics associated with continued commitment to further participation. Importantly, this research establishes that many of these characteristics have been developed through (un)learning.

Learning in struggle prompts activists to rethink and reimagine how they understand and intend to participate in political and social change. Through unlearning their attachment to ‘thin’ democracy, some activists have learned a ‘thicker’ version and the potential of ‘popular politics’ to create change from below; they believe change can happen through
the actions of ordinary people as individuals and groups. In the Egyptian case, the elections in 2012 and 2014, together with the coup in 2013, prompted critical reflection and engagement with notions of liberal democracy (including elections, constitutions, political parties, leaders) and institutions such as the media and the judiciary. In response to the events during and since 25 January, Dina showed she learned that liberal democracy fails to reach the poor. It fails to connect with the struggles of ordinary people, and fails to include their voices in its processes: “politically, it makes me realise that if I was [working] for one of the two campaigns for Sisi or Sabahi, I would just go to the street and talk more to these people and create focus groups and [talk about] what the people want. This is really where to start” (Dina, March 2014). The consequence of becoming critically conscious about power relations associated with institutional dimensions of ‘thin’ democracy is that many activists have reinterpreted what democracy should be. A progressive form of democracy, they suggest, would be closer to the concerns of people at “the street” level, and provide space for them to deliberate and participate meaningfully.

With reflections that emphasise ‘thick democracy’ (Gandin and Apple 2002), accounts of the ‘utopian’ 18 days in Tahrir highlight the positive experience of learning through participation, debate and within a pluralist setting. The diversity of backgrounds of the protesters during this period of the struggle was a key factor that meant that they felt like they had participated in a ‘democratic’ process. In particular, revolutionaries argued that 25 January was the embodiment of democracy - a prefigurative and agonistic politics based on respect for difference and the imagination of hope. In this respect, nationalists and many secular/revolutionary activists argued that the 30 June protests that led (not necessarily with their agreement) to the 2013 coup was a response to ‘undemocratic’ changes Morsi implemented during his tenure. However, despite the ‘utopian’ unity of the 18 days where participants were “living democracy” (Amira, April 2014), the apparent ease with which tensions and divisions between different groups resurfaced after Mubarak’s resignation suggests there is still much learning and unlearning to be done on all ‘sides’ of the struggle.

The 25 January revolution was an illustration of people imagining a different Egypt and a different relationship with the state: it was “a revolution of the imagination [that] pushed people into the streets” (Elseewi 2011:1198). But while Elseewi argues the imagination
during 2011 was one of individual subjectivity, it is important to reflect on how Western ideas of democracy – as encapsulated by the liberal, deliberative and radical debates – revealed themselves within the activists’ understandings of social change. My research was conducted in the UK not Egypt; it is likely that the participants’ understandings were formed through the experience of living within a Western democracy.

This thesis demonstrates that Western debates of democracy constrain the democratic imagination, shaping activists’ perspectives of the kind of change that could or should be possible in Egypt. For instance, there was an interesting tension within some understandings of democracy: in Chapter Six I explained how one activist talked about the importance of instrumental forms of democracy such as elections whilst also arguing that democracy is not possible anywhere and certainly not in Egypt. As well as demonstrating that struggle can lead to some critical questioning of what democracy means, activists suggest that debates of democracy created in the West shape the imagination to respond to those critical questions. These kinds of tensions in activists’ understandings highlight the continued relevance of Said’s (2003) critique of Western discourses of the ‘other’ that have produced specific histories and knowledge. In this case, a narrative of Middle Eastern exceptionalism further embeds the notion that a country like Egypt has particular limitations that make it inferior whilst at the same time reasserting that Western form of democracy is an important aim of development. My research demonstrates that the hegemony of democratic theory as conceptualized in the West has placed limits on the imagining of alternatives in all contexts, including among Egyptians living within the UK whose perspectives are informed by being both ‘within’ and ‘other’.

While a thicker understanding of democracy has emerged through the struggle, the intensity of division in Egypt suggests it is, like liberal democracy, unlikely to become a reality. This is because, despite unlearning the attachment to liberal democracy as the only model for creating social change, many struggle to imagine how any alternative would work. They advocate participation but some activists still perceive ‘thin’ democracy as evidence that democracy has been ‘achieved’. The hegemonic discourse of liberal democracy has been unlearned to some extent – activists know there should be something different - but it retains its dominance over the imagination of alternative, radical possibilities. Activists may perceive participatory forms of democracy to be the
ideal, but the notion of building consensus within a volatile context is unlikely. The diverging reactions to the events in Egypt (in particular, the 2013 coup and elections) raise questions of how to reimagine democracy and create a radical alternative where division and conflict is inevitable. In the remainder of this section, I outline the usefulness of radical interventions in building such an alternative.

8.6.2 Beyond consensus through pedagogical adversaries

This section argues that democratic theory can build on the insights within participatory and deliberative approaches to democracy through radical interventions. Alternatives to the liberal paradigm have forged useful critiques that exposed structural deficits and unequal power relations, thereby highlighting the need for creativity within theories of democracy and social change. However, when applied to the contemporary context of impassioned division as seen in Egypt, even the participatory and deliberative alternatives are left lacking: achieving consensus in Egypt appears highly unlikely because the conflict between groups and different ‘sides’ of the struggle is so intense. Radical approaches to democracy offer a creative avenue through which to explore how to move beyond this impasse. If the revolutionary impulse is to create a version of ‘thick’ democracy, this research suggests that activists must be receptive to ‘deep unlearning’ - being open to new information and different perspectives, and willing to part with socially constructed knowledge and truths, in particular the ‘truths’ about their democratic opponents, or to use Mouffe’s (2005) term, ‘adversaries’.

The intense division between Egyptians who share their opposition to SCAF raises questions about the possibilities of alternative ways of thinking about the contemporary challenge. Drawing on radical democracy, one alternative is raised by questioning how people can, or indeed whether they should, develop the agonism necessary “to think properly, in a political manner” (Mouffe 2014) and use their divisions as pedagogically productive ‘adversaries’. For instance, Zacharia, an activist who no longer identifies with any of the three key narratives said that, for him, the important question to come out of the 18 days was about how people in Egypt can live together in a better way: “25 January opened an argument that had never been opened before - what fixes our community?” (Zacharia, April 2014). Comments like these suggest Egyptians ‘know’ their society is divided and unjust - economically and socially, and increasingly along religious and sectarian lines - but the metaphorical ‘walls’ prevent them from thinking imaginatively
and finding a way forward. I argue that the solutions have consistently been hidden in liberal approaches to social change and democracy that emphasise formal structure and end-points: having succeeded in holding a ‘democratic’ election, the revolutionary objective was, according to the liberal paradigm, complete.

Despite many activists gaining new or deeper knowledge about democracy and social change through their participation and becoming more emotionally ‘invested’ (see Nour) in the continuing struggle, the divisions in Egypt expose two issues that have implications for theorising learning in social movements: first, between the ‘utopia’ of 25 January and the 2014 election of Sisi, the division between people who had been united intensified; second, the view that Egypt needed the return of the military regime became widespread, including among some activists who retained a commitment to secular and revolutionary ideas. The aftermath of Mubarak’s resignation failed to meet the activists’ hopes and expectations, raising further theoretical questions about learning and unlearning in struggle. If activists had really (un)learned through the ‘utopian’ pluralist experience of being united against Mubarak, and they had developed a sense of empathy for, and solidarity with, the people who demonstrated alongside them, how was it they could turn against each other so vehemently, particularly in the summer of 2013? In practice, how pluralist and ‘utopian’ was 25 January, and how deeply had they unlearned? Furthermore, if activists had learned to critique democracy, how was it that people who had protested against Mubarak and joined sit-ins throughout 2011 and 2012 were, by 2014, calling for a ‘benevolent dictatorship’ that could ensure ‘stability and security’?

An imaginative way to think about how to move beyond the division is to view contestation and challenge pedagogically. Secular/revolutionary and Islamist/anti-coup activists understand that SCAF succeeds because they have divided their opponents. Despite this, these activists have not yet unlearned the discourses that keep them divided and SCAF in power. If these divisions could be used productively - through the pedagogically rich processes of discomfort, disjuncture and the many other ways people unlearn by being challenged in their position - they could expose a real democratic alternative. The divisions and, importantly, the reaction to these divisions, highlight that conceptualisations of social change must address the issue of power and how discourses are created to silence and marginalise the ‘other’, creating fear that perpetuates
dominance rather than an agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2005) where people can respect difference and subsequently learn from the other. Importantly, the divisions show that learning to critique liberal democracy must be accompanied by (un)learning in ways that enable the critical reimagining of democracy. The continued division demands further investigation of the potential offered by radical approaches to democracy within creative conceptualisations of learning within social movements.

8.7 The developing political imagination

This chapter has discussed the processes, outcomes and implications of learning in struggles for social change, drawing on the case of the 25 January Revolution in Egypt. I provided an overview of the findings and developed the conceptualisation of social change through the notion of (un)learning. The chapter explored the dynamics of learning for social change: theorising through temporal and spatial distance; issues of receptivity deep unlearning; the importance of critical reflection in creating and ‘letting go’ of ‘truths’; prefiguration; and the retrospective nature of (un)learning. I introduced the term ‘pedagogical adversaries’ to conceptualise the divisions in Egypt and argued that, through a political imagination, antagonism and conflict could be understood as a pedagogically productive. In the next, and final chapter, I reflect on this discussion, considering the implications of this research for conceptualisations of social change. I draw my final conclusions and offer directions for future research.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCEPTUALISING AND REINTERPRETING SOCIAL CHANGE
This research aimed to develop understandings of the ways in which social movement participation impacts activists’ understandings of, and engagement with, social change. In periods of escalating movement participation and growing disaffection with the liberal order (Castells 2012; Žižek 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014), I argue it is important to continue to reflect on how social movements challenge, create and reconceptualise social change. In this final section, I return to the broader question of understanding and creating progressive social change by considering the contribution this thesis makes to conceptualisations of democracy, social movements, learning and education, and by offering directions for future research.

Theories of social change, such as democracy, are dominated by institutionalised, mechanistic concerns of distribution. Representative democracy, namely governance under neoliberalism, “involves definition, exclusion, separation” (Holloway 2002:229) and has established a conceptualisation of democracy that reifies elections, leaders and hierarchical structures. By questioning the discrepancy between democracy as a concept and its material reality, scholars argued for a “reassessment” of democratic theory (Shapiro 2003:2). Illustrating the necessity of continued critical engagement with theories that inform and shape political participation and imagination, I have established that activists within movements for change echo critiques of the distributive paradigm. By questioning democracy in its current, dominant form, activists reflect the position of radical democratic theories that argue that democracy should be viewed as an active, constantly changing process. This means that democratic theories should continue to respond to changing societies that have generated new forms of exclusion, not be understood simply as an institution to be implemented and left to stand still (Mouffe 2000). If democracy is created and lived by people, as Dewey (1939) argued, then it is important for theories of democracy to be reinterpreted in order to reflect the way in which it is created and lived in the contemporary context. Bringing together theories of social movements, learning and radical democracy, this research contributes an approach for this reinterpretation.

Establishing his radical framework of social change on the notion of ‘the scream’ - a refusal borne out of unease and confusion, coupled with a “longing” and “critical vibration” -Holloway (2002:1) reinvigorates theories of social change with an emphatic normative impulse. He contends that there must be a reimagining of revolution and
democracy that challenges the logic of trying to overcome capitalism through capitalist structures of ‘the state’, which removes the opportunities for self-determination. While he does not have the answers, Holloway’s thesis is clear in its call to respond to ‘the scream’ by thinking creatively: democracy in its current form is not working, and perspectives of the possibilities of social change have been co-opted by structures of capitalism. In this context, the concept of (un)learning within movements for social change offers an approach to respond to Holloway’s demand. By conceptualising the “outrage” (Davies 2008:19) that many people feel with the way the world is as a pedagogical tool through which to imagine progressive change, this thesis presents theoretical questions for the understanding of learning in situations of conflict and division. Thinking pedagogically about the learning potential of the frustrations and anger within ‘mystical forest’ presents new directions for understanding learning in social movements. In other words, when faced with confusion, disorder and a disjuncture between ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, there is the opportunity for creativity that can be challenging but productive. This research has shown that a creative imagination is necessary for theory as well as action. The radical framework of (un)learning in struggles for progressive social change outlined in this thesis offers one potential imagination.

A further contribution of this thesis is the reinterpretation of democracy as a process of social change whereby contestation and challenge are brought to the fore. Rejecting ‘thin’, and going beyond ‘thick’ approaches to democracy, this reinterpretation is based on the notion of contestation that resides within radical democratic theory and critical conceptualisations of unlearning. Through their rejection of the ‘post-political’, radical theorists argue that, “the affective dimension of politics is…crucial for democratic theory” (Mouffe 2005:25). This research takes this further by establishing the theoretical connection between the passions of radical democracy to unlearning, and by demonstrating that social movements – as a version of ‘thick’ democracy - can be pedagogically productive specifically because of the opportunities for discomfort and challenge. Within an “assertive democracy” (Davies 2008:2), there is the possibility for (un)learning because the confusion and disruption of certain events and conversations forces them to reassess their understandings and seek new or different ‘knowledge’. I approach contestation and challenge as concepts that can enliven debate, and encourage people to create deeper or different understandings of progressive social change. Introducing such a pedagogical approach could develop further understandings of how to
use conflict and division for positive change. I conceptualise this dynamic through the notion of ‘pedagogical adversaries’.

By creating the term ‘pedagogical adversaries’, I build on radical democratic theory by arguing that, given division cannot be eradicated and conflict will always exist within capitalism and the liberal paradigm (Mouffe 2000; 2005), we must find ways to use these conflictual relations to create progressive change. Introducing the pedagogical potential to the radical conception of ‘adversaries’, I open up theories of social change to the idea that irreducible conflict creates new opportunities for understanding and creating the world. In this radical conception of learning for progressive social change, activists (un)learn through agonistic interactions where opponents are seen as pedagogical partners with whom ideas are presented, debated, challenged and refined. Viewed as partners – even when in opposition – pedagogical adversaries could become agents of social change who are constantly (un)learning because they engage in a dialogue of (un)learning through challenge. Thinking about democratic ‘opponents’ dialogically is one way of responding to the limitations of democratic theory that understands democracy as consensus: if progressive theories of social change were more assertive and committed to their normative position, they could develop creative possibilities that emerge through dialogue. Highlighting the pedagogical potential of being challenged through opposition reinforces the necessity of theories where emotions and passions are seen as creative and dynamic elements of social change. It is this from this creativity people create and remake the world with a critical vision.

Applying and building a pedagogical framework that connects to radical democracy, this research develops the conceptualisation of social movements. Through the concept of (un)learning, I build on the understanding of social movements as more than organisations or structures that are defined by a particular label or as belonging to a particular moment in time. This analysis establishes an understanding of social movements as continuing pedagogical moments, events, conversations and ideas. A movement continues beyond, for example, the name or Twitter account, or the event, demonstration, sit-in or petition. Theorising social movements in this way – by emphasising their pedagogical nature – makes the potential of movements to create continuing change visible. Without this, we cannot fully understand the impact of social movements on activists, the wider public or future directions of social change. The
omission of (un)learning in social movement theory also limits our ability to understand where and how movements connect, and how ideas and practices of social change travel, temporally and spatially. Building a more detailed understanding of the processes, content and implications of learning within social movements, this research has shown that without pedagogical analyses that also look at the implications social movements on activists, we are unable to fully understand how and why a movement continues, or how and why it changes and develops. The explicit attention to learning and unlearning – through (un)learning - shows social movements must be conceptualised as constantly evolving, where activists can become critically conscious of how power relations shape understandings of, and opportunities to create, social, political and economic change. They can generate ideas about the way the world is and commit to being active in creating its transformation.

The research contributes to the theorisation of social movement learning, a specific field that connects the study of social movements and adult education, by reinforcing the necessity of continuing to examine the pedagogical dynamics within a movement for social change. I developed the concept of (un)learning in struggles for social change as the symbiotic, continuous and cumulative processes of learning and unlearning. I build on theories of social movements that show participation involves informal learning by highlighting that individual processes of self-directed enquiry and critical reflection also lead to (un)learning - the conscious surrendering of previous ‘truths’ or established ‘knowledge’ and the search for new or deeper understandings. In this way, (un)learning also furthers understandings of how movement participation impacts activists by highlighting the distinction between learning as acquisition and unlearning as conscious ‘letting go’, the antithesis of forgetting. This conceptual distinction is important because it gives agency to the activist. Understanding that activists consciously unlearn also exposes a specific process of critical thinking that leads to action. Subsequently, (un)learning furthers understandings of the processes of dialogue and conscientisation: it emphasises the indivisibility of learning and unlearning as a continuous process of gaining, reflecting upon and discarding ‘knowledge’; and provides a new way to understand the relationships between activists’ critical consciousness, empowerment and trajectories. These are necessary connections for thinking critically about the implications of participating in social movements on future social action, an area that requires further development within studies of social movements and learning in struggle.
A further contribution this thesis makes relates specifically to the concept of ‘theorising’. I establish that theoretical distance occurs temporally and spatially. Temporal distance from an event, moment or conversation enables activists to theorise because they become more removed from the pedagogical encounter. This separation allows the accumulation of additional pedagogical moments, enabling activists to build theoretical connections between them. In the weeks, months and years that follow an event, activists gain more space for theoretical enquiry and the development of critical consciousness, whether through critical reflection, dialogue, discussion or by reading specific texts. Retrospective (un)learning is, therefore, a key dimension of the theorising process: it is possible for activists to reflect differently on an event or conversation as time passes, and as they engage in continued theoretical enquiry and critical reflection. In a similar way, spatial distance enables (un)learning through theorising. Studies of informal learning recognise the importance of placing learning within its context but I take this further by demonstrating that retreating from a context also shapes learning. The conscious retreat and physical distance from the movement context enables theoretical enquiry and reflection. This is a new way of thinking about context in relation to learning within social movements and is particularly important in light of contemporary struggles that, with the emergence of online activism, take place within and across a multitude of spaces (see Castells 2012). Understanding that theorising happens through temporal and spatial distance reiterates the cumulative and retrospective nature of (un)learning in struggle. It can develop greater understanding of the implications of transnational and diaspora activism, and extend analyses of learning in social movements to online spaces.

Examining learning in social movements is important because it generates deeper understandings of how movements as collectives, and activists as individuals, contribute to and shape processes of social change. This research outlines an approach that can build explanations of how and why activists and movements might do this in the future. (Un)learning enables explorations of why the goals or ambitions of a movement or the people within it change; why activists continue to participate; or why a movement persists or ‘fails’. It allows us to examine the extent to which, if a ‘movement’ no longer exists, its pedagogical potential endures within the activists who participated by reflecting on their critically conscious ness. These are important insights for continuing to theorise social movements, including within contexts where resistance and organised
action are responded to with state-sanctioned force or oppression: understanding what and how activists continue to learn and unlearn as they engage in social change is important because it enables us to consider the implications of activism on future conceptualisations and directions of social change, and the people who participate in making those understandings a reality.

This research builds on cultural and cognitive analyses of social movements that established that movement participation involves often emotionally challenging events, experiences and conversations. I have argued that these are ‘pedagogical moments’ that can lead to (un)learning. However, by reflecting on the emotional dynamics of social movement participation from a pedagogical perspective and the notion of receptivity, I suggest that there may be factors that prevent some people from experiencing these events pedagogically. This research shows it is important to understand the extent to which receptivity is a factor that shapes what, how and the extent to which people (un)learn, and whether being receptive and open to new or different understandings is a precursor to becoming critically conscious and (un)learning. To illustrate, in this research, I departed from dominant approaches to social movements by drawing on three different perspectives (nationalist, Islamist and secular revolutionary) within a movement. Although a theoretical investigation of identity was not the objective of the research, the different perspectives highlighted the importance of developing theoretical understandings of the relationship between identity and (un)learning: to what extent, and in what ways, does identity impacts a person’s openness or ability to learn new knowledge and unlearn old ‘truths’? What factors prevent (un)learning from being progressive? Are some ‘truths’ more difficult to challenge, and if so, why? As well as contributing a deeper understanding of learning in social movements, these are important directions for future theories of education and learning (and, indeed (un)learning) because it can lead to understandings of how to build progressive understandings of social change and to overcome barriers to (un)learning. These questions invite reflections on the intersections of power, bias, identity and learning.

In this thesis, I have contributed to understandings of how ‘knowledge’ and ‘truths’ are unlearned. However, enquiries into the relationship between ‘new’ and ‘old’ knowledge can be developed further by examining what happens to the ‘old’ knowledge: does ‘old’ knowledge resurface, and if so when and why? To what extent can ‘new’ knowledge be a
sudden departure from ‘old’ knowledge, or is the shift a gradual and cumulative process, as this research suggests? Furthermore, in what ways is unlearning shaped by the content of the knowledge – are some ‘truths’ more difficult to unlearn than others? Another direction for further investigation relates to the finding in this research that theorising enables a process of ‘deep unlearning’. This could be developed further to explore other processes that deepen (un)learning, and to interrogate the extent to which depth is an issue that impacts participation and engagement – at what point does learning become ‘deep’? These questions would further the theorisation of social movements by generating insights into movement and activist trajectories: exploring the connections between the depth of a ‘truth’ and the impact on future action could enable understandings of how and why movements are (or are not) sustained.

Through this research, I argue learning for progressive social change requires the development of what Von Kotze (2012) calls a ‘political imagination’. I use the metaphor of the ‘mystical forest’ as a way of developing this idea of political imagination. The metaphor gives shape to the processes of (un)learning: it is the place where the unfamiliar and familiar coexist to be challenging and educative; the mystical forest represents the intersections of what was experienced in the moment and what is understood and (un)learned retrospectively when retreating from the activist experience. The political imagination is embodied when people (un)learn the invisibility of power and act on their politicisation to respond to the challenges of the contemporary struggle. Through reinterpreting social change, activists adapt how they participate in its creation: they do this through prefiguration; through their movement practices; and through their conscious decisions to commit to, or retreat from, organised political action. Inevitably, what activists say they intend to do or how they hoped to engage at the time of interview is not conclusive of what they will do in the future. However, it is important to understand the implications of (un)learning in struggles in the immediate and short term for two reasons: first, because it demonstrates that activism has an impact by prompting continued and imaginative (un)learning; second, because it can provide useful context for longitudinal investigations of the impact of activism on processes of social change more broadly. It raises questions of the extent to which learning in social movements enables or engenders critical reflection of, and engagement with, progressive conceptualisations of social change that lead to not just a ‘new consciousness’ (Hobson and Welbourne 1998) but a new critical consciousness.
Social movements are a long and continued process of social change: even if they are defined by a label such as the ‘25 January Revolution’, they are not confined to a particular moment. As I conclude this thesis in the summer of 2016, the Egyptian revolution continues. Activists and scholars close to the Egyptian struggle talk of mounting discontent and a renewed urgency for change. Indeed, the lead article in The Economist (6-12 August 2016:9) writes that, “repression and the incompetence of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi are stoking the next uprising.” Activists across the world, including in Egypt, who struggle for social change demonstrate the importance of understanding the continuing and enduring nature of social movements: as Amira (April 2014) reflected, “there has been a huge transformation, the impact will be in 20-30 years time”. This research demonstrates the importance of such understandings through a pedagogical analysis of activism: long after the sit-ins are dismantled, and in contexts where participating in organised movements comes with huge risk, it is important to understand how, and with what effect, activists develop critical skills that enable them to think about, and create, social change in a different way. Without these insights, we are in danger of overlooking the invisibility of power and silencing activists’ continuing struggle.

Reflecting more generally, this research has opened up new ways to understand the challenges of contemporary moments when activists continue to struggle for social change across the Middle East and the global North. As demonstrated in this thesis, progressive social change requires an imaginative and creative engagement with conflict and contestation. Through examining (un)learning and pedagogical adversaries, I have argued for understandings of social change where antagonisms can be productive, and where challenge is understood as a process that enables a continuous political imagination.
REFERENCES


ALLMAN, P. 1999. Revolutionary social transformation: Democratic hopes, political possibilities and critical education, Westport, USA, Bergin & Garvey.


DE SMET, B. 2012a. Egyptian workers and “their” intellectuals: The dialectical pedagogy of the Mahalla strike movement. Mind, Culture, and Activity, 19, 139-155.
DE SMET, B. 2012b. The Prince and the Pharoah: The Collaborative Project of Egyptian Workers and Their Intellectuals in the Face of Revolution. PhD degree in Political and Social Sciences, University of Ghent.


DENSCOMBE, M. 2007. The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects, Maidenhead, Open University Press.


EL-SIRGANY, S. 2015. To Vote or Not to Vote: Examining the Disenfranchised in Egypt's Political Landscape. Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East.


GHONIM, W. 2012. Revolution 2.0: The power of the people is greater than the people in power: A memoir, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.


HANNA, P. 2012. Using Internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 12, 239-242.


be designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in Conflict-Torn Societies.


PFAFF, N. 2009. Youth culture as a context of political learning How young people politicize amongst each other. Young, 17, 167-189.


RAMADAN, A. 2013. From Tahrir to the world: The camp as a political public space. European Urban and Regional Studies, 20, 145-149.


RODENBECK, M. 2010. The long wait: After three decades of economic progress but political paralysis, change is in the air. The Economist, July 15th 2010.


SOLIMAN, S. 2012. The Aggravated Student Movement: From rocketing tuition fees to a decision to separate sexes in classrooms, students all over Egypt are fighting for their grievances to be heard. *Egypt Today: The Magazine of Egypt*, 25 September.


ZAJDA, J., DAVIES, L. & MAJHANOVICH, S. (eds.) Comparative and Global Pedagogies: Equity, Access and Democracy in Education. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands


APPENDICES

Interview participants

Abu Bakr identifies with the anti-coup movement. He was born in the MENA region and moved to the UK as a young child. He is 25-35 years old.

Ahmad identifies with the anti-coup movement. He moved to the UK from Egypt in his early 20s and has lived in the south of England for over 20 years. He is 45+ years old.

Ali was born in the MENA region and moved to the UK as a young child. He identifies with the secular, revolutionary youth. He is 18-25 years old.

Amira identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 10 years. She is 45+ years old.

Ashraf identifies with the nationalist position. He was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 25 years. He is 45+ years old.

Ayesha identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement but, in the aftermath of Raba’ massacre, is sympathetic to Morsi’s supporters. She spent much of her youth in Egypt and has lived in the UK for around 10 years. She is 45+ years old.

Dina identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement but is sympathetic to the nationalist position. She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for approximately 5 years. She is 35-45 years old.

Eman identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 4 years. She is 25-35 years old.

Faoud identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. He was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 4 years. He is 25-35 years old.

Farida identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. She was born and raised in the UK. She is 18-25 years old.
Heba identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 4 years. She is 45+ years old.

Hala identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 4 years. She is 25-35 years old.

Hany identifies with the nationalist position. He was born and raised in Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 20 years. He is 45+ years old.

Hazem no longer identifies with any aspect of the Egyptian struggle. He was born in Egypt and travelled to the UK to continue his university education.

Khaled identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. He was born and raised in the MENA region and Egypt and has lived in the UK for over 5 years. He is 35-45 years old.

Mohammed identifies with the anti-coup movement and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. He has lived in the UK for 3 years. He is 45+ years old.

Mona identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. She has dual nationality but has never lived in Egypt. She is 25-35 years old.

Nour identifies with the secular, revolutionary movement. He was born in and raised in the UK. He is 25-35 years old.

Omar identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. He was born in Egypt and moved to the UK as a young child. He was educated in the UK. He is 18-25-years old.

Rana identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. She was born in Egypt and spent her early years in the MENA region. She was predominantly educated in the UK. She is 18-25-years old.

Salma identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. She was born in the MENA region and educated in the UK. She is 18-25-years old.

Sami identifies with the anti-coup movement in the UK. He was born in the UK to Egyptian parents. He was educated in the UK. He is 18-25-years old.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sana</td>
<td>Secular, revolutionary</td>
<td>Born and raised in Egypt, lived in UK over 3 years</td>
<td>18-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>movement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Although willing to be identified, given the increasingly brutal clampdown on human rights activists since the time of the interview, her name has been changed within the thesis to protect the identities of people who may be close to her.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayeb</td>
<td>Anti-coup</td>
<td>Born in the UK, spent early years growing up in Egypt, returned in mid-20s</td>
<td>45+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walid</td>
<td>Secular, revolutionary youth</td>
<td>Born in the MENA region, moved young to UK</td>
<td>18-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youssef</td>
<td>Anti-coup movement</td>
<td>Born in MENA region, moved young to UK</td>
<td>35-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakaria</td>
<td>Secular, revolutionary youth</td>
<td>Born and raised in Egypt, lived in UK 4 years</td>
<td>25-35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Brief timeline to 2014**

**PRE-REVOLUTION**

1952
End of British colonial rule and monarchy in revolution lead by military man, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

1981

2004
Talk of Gamal Mubarak taking over the presidency from his father, Formation of Kefaya opposition movement

June 2010
Murder by police of Khaled Said in Alexandria

18 December 2010
Protests begin in Tunisia, sparked by immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi

14 January 2011
Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, steps down.

**THE 25 JANUARY REVOLUTION – ‘THE 18 DAYS’**

25 January 2011
‘National Police Day’. Protests against the abuses by the police took place around Egypt. Protesters died in Suez.

26 & 27 January 2011
Protester numbers slowly continue to rise. Plans made for large protests on Friday 28th. Wael Ghonim, founder of ‘We are All Khaled Said’ Facebook page, reported as missing.

28 January 2011
‘Day of Anger’: Major disruption to internet and mobile phone services. Protester numbers swelled to the thousands. 11 killed in Suez. Hundreds caught up in violent clashes around the county.

29 January 2011
Mubarak televised statement 1: announces he has sacked the cabinet but refuses to step down. Appoints vice-president, Omar Suleiman. Soldiers deployed on the streets in Cairo. Protesters continue to join the occupation of Tahrir Square.

30 January 2011
Mohammed El Baradei addresses protesters in Tahrir Square. The army refused orders to use live ammunition against protesters defying the curfew.

31 January 2011
Protesters continued to defy the curfew. Opposition groups call for the ‘Million Man March’ and general strike the next day. Mubarak’s new cabinet sworn in.

1 February 2011
Estimates of 100,000-250,000 protesters in Tahrir Square. Mubarak televised statement 2: announces he will not run for re-election but refuses to resign.

2 February 2011
The ‘Battle of the Camel’ occurs in the early hours of the morning. El Baradei calls for the army to intervene and
reaffirm the call for Mubarak’s resignation.

3 February 2011
More violent clashes in Tahrir Square with at least 5 five people dead.

4 February 2011
Day 11 of the demonstrations, with reports of millions of demonstrators in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and across Upper Egypt.

5 February 2011
A heavy military presence in Tahrir Square. The leadership of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party resigns, including Mubarak’s son, Gamal.

6 February 2011
Muslim Brotherhood issues a statement stating they will enter discussions with the government. ‘Sunday of Martyrs’ - Muslim protesters protected Christians as they prayed.

7 February 2011
Wael Ghonim, founder of ‘We are All Khaled Said’ Facebook page, released by security services.

8 February 2011
Huge demonstrations across the country continue, including some protesters gathering outside parliament.

9 February 2011
Further demonstrations take place at Parliament and labour unions join the protests. Strikes take place across the country.

10 February 2011
Various moves made by cabinet and officials to seek to placate demonstrators. Military council met without Mubarak. Mubarak televised statement 3: said those who abused positions would be penalised and that he would remain until the end of his term in September.

11 February 2011
Announced in a statement by vice-president, Omar Suleiman, Mubarak resigns. Field Marshall Tantawi, as Chairman of SCAF, assumes interim control.

THE REVOLUTION UNDER THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF ARMED FORCES (SCAF)

February 2011
Pro-democracy protesters clean up Tahrir Square. Police and public sector workers hold protests demanding better pay and conditions. The military leadership criticises strike action.

19 March 2011
Constitutional referendum: 77.2% agree to military’s timetable for early parliamentary elections (turnout 41%)

April 2011
Sit-ins return to Tahrir Square with protesters calling for more progress in the dismantling of the military regime. The Muslim Brotherhood officially calls on members to
support the protests. Tension between protesters and military builds throughout April.

Mubarak is questioned by prosecutors and the National Democratic Party is dissolved.

June 2011

Demonstrations on the anniversary of Khaled Said’s death, most notably the line of silent protesters dressed in black in Alexandria.

Protests continued in Cairo with clashes between security forces and demonstrators intensifying.

July 2011

Protests against continued SCAF rule continued amid calls for ‘a second revolution’. In a particularly large march known as Abbasiya on 23 July, thousands attempted to gather at the Ministry of Defence. Military police fired shots and hundreds were wounded.

August 2011

The sit-in at Tahrir was dispersed.

Hosni Mubarak and his two sons, Gamal and Ala’a, began their trial for corruption and killing of protesters during the 18 days in January.

9 October 2011

Maspero: the military attacked protesters who gathered outside the state television station. The demonstrators were predominantly Coptic Christians. At least 25 protesters were killed.

19 November 2011

Mohamed Mahmoud: more than 40 people were killed in the violent dispersal of 6-days of protests in Tahrir Square and Mohamed Mahmoud Street that adjoins the square. Among other demands, protesters were calling for support for the families of people who had lost their lives during the 18 days.

December 2011

State security services continued to use violence to disperse protesters and dismantle sit-ins. The Girl in the Blue Bra incident of a young woman being dragged across Tahrir Square by security forces, her abaya open and her underwear exposed.

1 February 2012

Port Said: 73 people were killed at a football match in Port Said in riots between rival football teams, Al Ahly and El Masry. Protests that followed highlighted the poor security at the stadium.

23-24 May 2012

First round of voting in presidential elections. Mubarak’s last prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi proceeded to the final round.

June 2012

Mubarak sentenced to life in prison.

Second round of presidential elections.

24 June – official conformation of Morsi’s win with 52% of the vote.
30 June – Morsi officially inaugurated as president and Tantawi stepped down.

THE REVOLUTION UNDER MORSI

July – October 2012 Various decrees and steps taken by Morsi to implement new constitution, laws and practices of government that are met by widespread protests, including by textile workers and doctors. Morsi issued a constitutional decree that gave the office of the president unparalleled powers. Clashes between Morsi supporters and opponents in Cairo result in injuries on both sides.

22 November 2012 Large protests organised by opposition activists were held against Morsi’s presidential decree.

December 2012 Demonstrators and security forces clashes outside the presidential palace, Itidaya, in Cairo. Constitutional referendum approved by 64% but with a decreasing turnout among the electorate.

April 2013 Tamarod began collecting signatures for a petition calling for early presidential elections.

‘THE COUP’

30 June 2013 First anniversary of Morsi’s inauguration: opponents gathered at Tahrir Square, outside Al-Ittihadiya, the presidential palace, and across the country. Morsi’s supporters began a sit-in at Rab’a el-Adawiya and other squares.

1-2 July 2013 The military leadership issued President Morsi with a 48-hour ultimatum to resign. Morsi rejected the ultimatum in a statement the following day.

3 July 2013 Morsi was arrested in the late afternoon and placed in detention. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces issued a statement suspending the constitution. Defence Chief, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, assumed control.

July – August 2013 Violent clashes between security forces, opposition activists and Morsi supporters continue. Widespread crackdowns on journalists, including the arrest of Peter Gresty, Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed. Sectarian violence spikes, with attacks on churches and Coptic Christians being reported across the country.

14 August 2013 Rab’a massacre: hundreds of Morsi supporters killed in the dispersal of the sit-in.
### POST-COUP AND RETURN OF SCAF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| August – November 2013 | The widespread unrest, violence and detention of Morsi supporters continues. Clashes between revolutionaries and security forces continue throughout the following months.  
An attack in Sinai leaves 15 policemen dead. |
| February 2014    | Opposition candidates and parties announce their boycott of the upcoming presidential elections.                                                  |
| March – May 2014 | Egyptian court sentences 529 Morsi supporters to death. Nominations open for upcoming presidential elections in April.  
El-Sisi confirms he will run for the presidency, as does candidate from the 2012 election, Hamdeen Sabahi.  
Widespread arrest and detention of opposition (pro-Morsi, secular, revolutionary, pro-democracy) activists.  
Estimates suggest in excess of 40,000 prisoners. |
| May-June 2014    | First and second round of presidential elections. The final round sees Hamdeen Sabahi beaten by Sisi’s 97% majority.                                    |
| 8 June 2014      | Sisi inaugurated as president.                                                                                                                   |
Outline of interview questions

Questions for participants
(to be cross referenced by theme in my project plan)

Background
- Could you tell me about your family background and your connection to Egypt?
  - Born / age in UK? Family / parents?
  - Schooling? Level of education? Job/Profession?
  - How regularly did you travel to Egypt? How long for?
- Are you political? How engaged were you in Egyptian politics? In politics in general, including in the UK?
- What about your peers / friends? Is there a connection to Egypt / Middle East?
  - Do you differ from your family / peers in terms of engagement with the issues in Egypt?
  - How many travelled during the time of the January 25 revolution? Since then?
- What were your hopes at the time of the January 25 revolution? How did you feel about the election process and about Morsi’s election?

Before 25 Jan
- How closely were you following the news from Egypt? How do you get your news from / about Egypt?
- At what point did you decide to participate in the January 25 revolution?
  - What are your reasons for travelling to participate?
  - Did you discuss this with other Egyptians? Other friends? What was their reaction / response?
  - Were there any particular moments that encouraged you to travel?
  - Do you think social media had any role in encouraging / influencing Egyptians in the diaspora to travel? Why and how?/ why not?

During 25 Jan
- Can you tell me about your experience and your first impressions when you arrived in Egypt around Jan 25… where did you go, who did you meet, what did you do?
- Can you describe to me how you participated?
  - Did people have specific roles?
  - What kinds of people were you with?
- How did people work together?
  - Were their leaders? Who? How?
  - Was there consensus building? Who/How?
  - Create a strategy?
  - Create an agreed goal?
  - Create unity among different groups?
- How did you and other activists know where to go, how to organise?
  - Communication?
  - What kinds of organised activities were used to support the activists – how organised? For what purpose?
After / continuing

- In what ways have you participated in the revolution since 25 Jan? (then explore…)
- What are your feelings about how the continuing situation has been presented in the media, both in Egypt, the West and in online media?
- To what extent and in what ways has the revolution changed you / the people around you / your relationships? Your connection to Egypt as a (British/Egyptian)?
- How important was it to you as an Egyptian to take part in the revolution? Why?

Broader questions

Democracy / social movements
- Egyptians living outside Egypt are unable to vote. How do you feel about this? How important is voting to establishing a democracy?
- In what ways can Egyptians living in the UK contribute to the revolution?
- How has your participation changed your views of
  - Politics in general
  - The relationship between politics and religion
  - Participating in the political process
  - The role of social movements
- What does democracy mean to you now? What could it mean?

Education
- People have commented about the need for more education… what are your views on the role of schooling / schools in Egypt? How important / what role can education play in creating / building democracy?
- What about in the UK?
Sample extracts of interview transcriptions

Filename: 713_0065  
Date: 02/09/2014  
Participant: 23  
Location: SKYPE


What role do you think Egyptians in the UK can have in the continuing revolution?

I think the biggest purpose of the protests and I know many people disagree with me is showing solidarity. These people that are fighting in Egypt see you that they are not alone there are people from around the world that are standing with us. Another thing is keeping the issue alive. Everything has an expiry date so it is not going to stay in the news forever but the protests say hey the issue is not dead, it is still going on... Just cause it’s not in the news it doesn’t mean that people are not being killed and girls are not being raped etc...

Another thing is showing that we object. Whether the British government or the Egyptian government, they know that we are doing a protest and they see them and whether or not they respond they do see them so they know that there are people who object and these people are not just going to chill out and we will do whatever we want to do and I think that is a huge thing...

I think for a lot of people, but not for me, for a lot of people it is getting out their anger. They can say hey we’re going to go to protest and shout a bit and say yes we have done something and we have helped them. Obviously it doesn’t have a huge impact...

I think the time for protest is dead. I don’t think protests about huge of an impact any more and I think what should be done now and what we’re planning to do from now on is more about raising awareness, changing public perception, Showing people what is going on because no-one can help if they don’t know what’s going on... Getting people to know those kinds of events and things that would be more beneficial. So I don’t think protests in England are actually helpful anymore, I think They are helpful and important in Egypt’s and I am glad that they are still going on in Egypt but I don’t think they are important here.

About activism? I have learned everything is crazy last minute and that’s the one thing I have learned! Don’t plan for anything because it’s not going to happen the way you planned... And it goes both ways, you have to plan because if you don’t it will be a disaster!, plan but don’t plan! I have learned that people will be difficult to work with but you have to go with it. Everybody kind of wants to be in chargeAnd you just kind of have to try and find a balance and not always do things the way you want to do them. And that activism isn’t all that is hyped up to be – For example people in school see me and they say oh hey you make changes but actually I don’t think I
make any changes at all. I think there is a lot more that could be done. It’s long term, not short term. With activism lot of people feel like hey I have done something that actually know you haven’t done very much, you could always could do more. Which is part of the reason I want to go into politics. I want to change things on a larger scale I’m not just on the side kind of thing. I have also learned the activism is draining and stressful...

Politics is very, very important. They affects everything, changes everything, the affect way we all live our lives. That can be said for other things like economics, but with politics you’re deciding how the country is going to be run, you’re deciding the rules, you’re deciding What’s right and what’s wrong, what am I going to allow what I’m not going to allow... For example the riots in Ferguson... Am I going to shoot all of the protesters or is there a better way to deal with it? It’s those kinds of decisions that change things on a bigger scale. You affect the lives of everyone when you look at policies for example like social work, orphans. How my going to deal with them and what’s the right way of dealing with them? You’re affecting everyone’s lives...

Right now I want to study the things I am interested in and I think are important and then we’ll see... I’m interested in doing further study but I might change my mind so we will say. There is a huge debate constantly going on in my head where I think about you I want to go into NGOs voluntary work or do I want to go into politics and they about things I love so I don’t know.Possibly academia as well...

I think we should definitely be more engaged in the formal politics. You know Lobbying MPs, writing to them, there is a team in based in London that are doing but at the moment but they are not doing huge deal but I do think it’s something that is important to be done..

This might sound really controversial but I am not the hugest advocate of democracy. I mean if you compare the way things are in the UK all or Russia or china and you know in china, they don’t have Google or Facebook and you can look from the outside you don’t have to live there to you know that they don’t have much freedom but they are not hiding it and everyone feels like they know that that’s how it is in China. But I feel like in the UK there is a façade of freedom and democracy but we don’t really get that. A lot of things are controlled... Our unbiased media is actually really biased.. And the whole spying on phone calls and through Facebook and that kind of thing and not really freedom of speech...I think... That’s what I think about democracy: It creates a façade of freedom when it’s not really there. I don’t think we really do get democracy... I don’t really think that the people's will is really wanted, for example you can choose between Conservatives and LibDem and labour and you could get what you want Don’t think they are that different. But if you want something that is different like you want to vote for the BNP you are not going to get what you want because from what we can see now They’re not going to get in and become in charge of the country, they are not going to have that huge impact. So if you want something
different you’re never going to really get what you want. I don’t know what the alternative would be and I’m not suggesting and alternative but I am just saying that is democracy is about the will of the people that I don’t think we’re getting that and that’s why I have never been a huge advocate of democracy...

The way I thought democracy was in Egypt... you elect someone and you bear with it for the next four years. That’s how we do that in England... A lot of people would have voted for David Cameron that wouldn’t vote for him again now but that is just how it is. Otherwise there would be chaos... He is Prime Minister of the country for a reason and he has much more experience and knowledge than we do so maybe he is doing things in a way that we can’t understand now and that is why we voted for him and we trust him and chaos on the streets. For example with David Cameron, People don’t revolt against David Cameron... They have strikes against pay and working conditions and that is right, over the policies he makes and that’s fine but they don’t revolt against David Cameron. And that’s how I thought it should be with Morsi as well. He has made a bad decision revolt against the bad decision don’t revolt against him. Because otherwise who are you going to keep in? No country is going to like the same person forever...

Have always been into this kind of thought – democracy vs dictatorship, Why are we so against communism now? Obviously it’s because of the World War and we are hearing history and we’re hearing how terrible communism is from the winners point of view but what about if the other side had one would we think democracy was such a bad thing? Would we thought capitalism is a terrible thing? I have always been into books like brave new world and 1984 and they are fiction I know but they kind of explore those ideas... so I have always been into that but it has been advanced from the Arab spring As we have seen what happens and we see the example of Syria and Egypt and they are trying to overthrow their president but they can’t agree on anyone, so what’s going on... So we see different examples that have made me think about it more...

Filenames: MK01, MK02, MK03
Date: various Feb–June 2014
Location: Manchester

Context: PhD student. Male. mid-30s. Egyptian living in UK. Met on many occasions. Notes below are from informal meetings and formal interviews. Secular/revolutionary.

24/3/2014

During 25 Jan: Discussions and conversations, moments

Most of the discussions we had were always trying to convince people who were... I mean, me and my brothers and my friends were very much into taking this to the end and not backing down at all, not accepting any compromise and we always had the idea that if we accept a compromise they will just take all these young people and put them in prison and they will go
back on all the promises... so if the guy left in Tunisia then Mubarak should also go... 95% of the discussions were trying to convince others that this is the way to do it. Like accepting a compromise or backing off now would not solve the problem. Discussions with neighbours or family, there were many people who went to the square just to look around, to experience the atmosphere or whatever to see what was happening and all the time we were just trying to convince those who has the idea to accept the compromise that we shouldn't do it.

But the discussions with the Islamists and the ideological things I would say they were not serious but more a way of killing time, of doing something. Because of the long hours of staying in the square you have to talk about something. So when you find somebody with a beard you just...[laughs] actually one of my friends used to just say "let's go hunting for a beard" and you would tease him into having an argument just for the sake of killing time and having fun. But most of the serious debates were trying to mobilise people to keep going. To stay resilient.

**Strategy? How organised? Coordination?**

It wasn't organised on a massive scale but sometimes for example again my brother and one of his friends was engaged with this Islamist and a discussion about whether we should apply sharia law in Egypt and one of his friends came to me and said: you are good at this so come and help. So again it was just aimless discussions, just to kill time. At the end those people who were killed in the square did not have a say. So this is not the issue, it was that Mubarak should just go. These discussions became more urgent in the summer after about was gone and that's when we needed to discuss what should we do next. Sometimes I was called to speak to people, I went on to BBC radio as someone who could speak good English but again it was very individualistic.

[Organisation] There was not really... With time, I used to say that it has become its own state and that all you needed was an airport and a hospital and you could live and die here, there was everything... Places to get food, toilets, security guarding the entrances but I think most of these were individual initiatives and then people who knew each other and became friends, for example you would hear on a microphone we need 30 people at the entrance on a certain street and we need people to help search. I never did any of that but there were always people willing to go, but there was not a central way of organising. Except that guarding the entrances in this particular area was mainly done by the Muslim brotherhood youth. They have this ability to organise so they did that more. Also much of the food for example, would just street vendors became there to get kushari to sell to people and so there was a market created out of demand.

**Significant moments - personally**
The turning points were definitely Tunisia, this was definitely crucial. And 28 January when they burned the NDP, and after Mubarak’s second speech and of course on the last day when we went to the Palace. Yes there were a few big events that shaped what happened afterwards.

The only thing that changed for me is that I never felt that this is going to happen, even after Tunisia. I remember that I was pessimistic after the elections we won the elections were rigged and nothing happened, no reaction to it, I thought this was a hopeless case. And Tunisia happened and some people started saying let’s go and topple the regime on the 25. And I thought, we can’t do a revolution by setting an appointment beforehand, revolutions just happen. So I thought this was never going to work and I was very pessimistic about it and actually I didn’t go to the very first demonstration. So I woke up on the 25 and I was making fun of it all the time and then suddenly I saw that many people were on the streets and I went with my brother three of four hours after it started, so yes, that is what made me think there is something that can happen… So of course when I said I was pessimistic it wasn’t that I thought Mubarak should not go but I just thought that this is not going to work and the revolution will happen if it happens.