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DEBATE



Introduction: revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt

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SUMMARY

This introduction to the *ROAPE* debate reasserts the centrality of revolutionary theory to understand the dynamics of social and political struggles in contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Framed around the conceptual and political interventions brought about by Brecht De Smet's *Gramsci on Tahrir* (2016), we discuss the utility of Gramscian concepts in explaining the trajectories of social mobilisations in the peripheries of global capitalism.

The financial crisis of 2008, the rise of right-wing 'populism' in Western Europe and the USA, the Arab uprisings and new forms of local and global (intersectional) struggles indicate that the 'neoliberal' variant of capitalism is at a crossroads.¹ The financial meltdown has revealed the structural instabilities of deregulated capital flows, while the tendency toward increased authoritarianism and securitarian management shows the limits of the institutions of bourgeois democracy to absorb mass discontent. At the same time, episodes such as the 'Arab Spring' sharply posit the relevance of categories such as revolution and counter-revolution for the 21st century. The revolutionary uprisings, first in Tunisia and then in regional heavyweight Egypt, reinvigorated mass emancipatory politics throughout the Middle East, the African continent and the world at large. Street protests in Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Malawi, Mauritania, Senegal, Sudan, Swaziland and Uganda (Harsch 2012), Gezi Park protests in Turkey and movements such as *Indignados* in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the USA were directly inspired by the Arab uprisings and the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo in particular, which offered a powerful, contemporary imaginary of popular revolution. The moment of mobilisation captured in Tahrir came to represent the potential for a global rupture of capitalism.

Yet by the end of 2013 the outcomes of the Egyptian uprising had already proved disappointing. The military, bureaucratic and security elites from the Mubarak era – the so-called deep state – were able to hold onto state power. Notwithstanding the fall of a dictator, essential political and economic structures remained unchanged. Moreover, the counter-revolution was successful, not *despite* the mobilisation of the masses, but *because* of it. The current strongman, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, came to power through a clever and agile appropriation of the grassroots *Tamarod* (Rebel) campaign, which rallied hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of ordinary Egyptians in the streets.

The Egyptian experience raises fundamental questions about the process of revolution and counter-revolution, about the agency of 'the people' and of the ruling classes in times of revolt, about the specificity of societal change in the periphery, and about the general nature of state power in an era of global crisis. Brecht De Smet's book *Gramsci on Tahrir: revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt* addresses these issues through a Gramscian approach. As part of Pluto Press's *Reading Gramsci* series the book engages not only with the Egyptian revolution, but also with the current literature and debates on the thought of the Sardinian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Through a re-engagement with Gramsci's ideas, and especially with the concepts of hegemony, passive revolution and Caesarism, De Smet offers a lens through which to interpret current processes of revolution and restoration.

The present *ROAPE* debate brings together critical engagements with the book which evaluate De Smet's contribution to the literatures on contemporary Egypt, Marxist theory and the broader questions of development, emancipation and revolutionary political practice. While the contributions to the debate focus largely on *Gramsci on Tahrir*, the approach and key arguments of the book are also contrasted with relevant contemporary texts, such as Gilbert Achcar's *The people want* (2013), Maha Abdelrahman's *Egypt's long revolution* (2014) and Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny's *Bread, freedom, social justice* (2014). The debate thus aims not only to assess the recent scholarship on the Egyptian revolution, but also to contextualise the theoretical and political questions posed by the book and their relevance to the wider Global South-oriented political debates in line with the historical, scholarly and political orientation of the *Review of African Political Economy*.

As signalled above, a central figure and conceptual resource that cross-cuts all contributions in the debate is Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Gramsci has been one of the most influential Marxist thinkers as his ideas have been appropriated by different disciplines within the critical social sciences, ranging from political theory, post-colonial and cultural studies to international political economy. Three Gramscian concepts are foregrounded in *Gramsci on Tahrir*: hegemony, passive revolution and Caesarism. The concept of *hegemony* has travelled through many disciplines, taking on different meanings. For Gramsci, hegemony means at its core class leadership: in modern bourgeois society, subaltern groups are not only dominated by the ruling class, they also may actively accept its class rule on the basis of its political leadership, its cultural aura, its military prestige and its technical ability to 'manage' society. These groups become subordinated allies of the hegemonic class, whereas groups that remain oppositional are dominated (Gramsci 1971, 57, Q1§44).² Bourgeois domination and hegemony are achieved by a combination of force (violence, or coercion), fraud (or corruption), and consent-generating policies (Q1§48).³

Gramsci's notion of *passive revolution* has witnessed a renewed interest from scholars within the domain of international political economy and critical development studies. While the concept is discussed at length in *Gramsci on Tahrir*, a provisional definition has to suffice here. Passive revolution refers to those historical, often gradual, processes of capitalist state formation and reformation that are achieved through mechanisms of state intervention, political cooptation and economic concessions to subaltern groups. Gramsci investigated historical episodes ranging from German and Italian unification, over Fascism, to Fordism through the conceptual lens of passive revolution. The idea of *Caesarism* is closely connected to passive revolution and to Marx's concept of

Bonapartism. In brief, it points to the relative autonomy, in times of crisis, of a class faction or even the state itself to transcend momentarily the warring camps of the class struggle and subjugate the whole of society to its direction. These tentative remarks already hint at the usefulness of passive revolution and Caesarism as categories for the study of colonial and post-colonial state formation and, to further our understanding of the entwined trajectories of national liberation struggles, authoritarianism and (under)development.

Due to the fragmentary nature of Gramsci's main writings collected in the *Prison notebooks*, his thought has been interpreted in varying and even contradictory ways, leading to the emergence of what Roberto Rocca called a 'prêt-à-porter version of Gramsci' (2012, 20). For some, the figure of Gramsci has become a hand puppet, mouthing scholars' own theories through the open text of the *Prison notebooks*. For example, Perry Anderson (1976) and Alex Callinicos (2010) have argued that contradictory interpretations of the notions of respectively hegemony and passive revolution arise directly from inconsistencies and 'concept-stretching' within the *Prison notebooks* themselves. Nevertheless, Gramsci indicates (Q4§1) that there is a coherent leitmotiv or 'rhythm of thought' operating throughout the *Prison notebooks* that transcends its scattered character. In the past decade new scholarship such as Adam David Morton's *Unravelling Gramsci* (2007) and Peter Thomas's *The Gramscian moment* (2009) has reasserted not only the internal consistency of Gramsci's thought, but also its relevance for an understanding of crisis, struggle, and transformation within contemporary global capitalism. *Gramsci on Tahrir* inscribes itself within this tradition, critically deploying Gramsci's ideas to comprehend the process of revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt and its relation to the broad historical development of capitalism. Conversely, the Egyptian experience serves as an interlocutor of Gramsci's ideas.

Finally, the specific Egyptian trajectory is embedded within the general process of global capitalist development. Drawing on Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development, De Smet combines the insights of Achcar's *The people want* (2013) and Hanieh's *Lineages of revolt* (2013). Achcar's point of departure is the *particularity* of the region, and especially its long history of 'fettered development' which leads him to emphasise the Middle East and North Africa's (MENA's) specific political and economic trajectory, a trajectory defined by a state of permanent crisis. For Achcar the 'peculiar modality' of capitalism in the MENA is the patrimonial rentier state and neoliberalism merely represents a new layer of oppression and exploitation to this historical set-up, channelling public resources more strongly in the hands of a select group of oligarchs. Hanieh, on the other hand, analyses the Egyptian case from a decisively global perspective, taking into account the internationalisation of capital, class and state, and – following Lenin – the role of imperialism as a geopolitical, military and economic force. Hanieh points toward the convergence of different fractions of capital, highlighting the connection between global, regional and national ebbs and flows of accumulation. In Hanieh's account, instead of representing a new layer on top of an existing regime, neoliberal accumulation is understood as a process that has fundamentally restructured the nature of state and class in the region – and in the Global South in general. De Smet integrates both perspectives by embedding Egypt's particular trajectory within the world-historical process of uneven and combined global capitalist development, crisis, and (passive-)revolutionary transformation. This view allows him to explore populist and authoritarian tendencies in the West as well, which are understood as varying articulations of a general crisis of neoliberal accumulation and hegemony.

Furthermore, this analysis leads De Smet to a rejection of the possibility and desirability of a gradual strategy of stages of struggle and development.⁴ De Smet argues that the transition of peripheral states such as Egypt toward democracy on a sovereign, capitalist base is impossible. Due to the uneven and combined nature of global capitalism, the struggle of popular forces in peripheral nations demanding even modest political and social reforms directly faces the limits and inelasticity of capitalist development, whether driven by the market or by a 'sovereign' state. Statist political economy may restrict the role of markets in order to achieve 'national' development, but due to its reliance on a centralist, authoritarian state apparatus and its subordination of the interests of labour and other subaltern actors to the 'national' interest, it does not represent a liberation from capital (Selwyn 2014). De Smet emphasises the importance of popular struggles in the periphery, precisely because they do not represent an attempt to 'catch up' with the centre's capitalist development, but, instead, embody a practical critique of capital in its 'naked' form. In this regard, the horizon of Tahrir was not only the supersession of 'backward', 'dependent', 'crony' capitalism, but of the capital relation itself. Hence, drawing on Marx and Trotsky, De Smet stresses the 'permanency' of the revolutionary process, alluding to the inextricable entwinement of political and social struggles and to its political snowball effect, which stimulated protest movements in the MENA, the wider African continent and beyond.

Gramsci on Tahrir positions itself within the existing literature on the Egyptian revolution among those works that are sympathetic to the emancipatory movement of workers, peasants, women, the urban poor and other subaltern groups.⁵ De Smet does not reduce popular agency to an aimless 'explosion' or the malleable object of political forces or the state,⁶ but considers the capacities of popular mobilisation to generate and sustain societal alternatives 'from below'. Instead of evaluating the revolutionary process merely on the basis of its outcomes, De Smet insists on comprehending revolution as a process of class and popular subject formation, intersected by ruling classes' strategies of repression, deflection and cooptation. Roberto Roccu's contribution to the debate considerably expands De Smet's take on subaltern subject formation, questioning the possibility of a broad alliance between subaltern actors in the Egyptian context.

The book's conceptual infrastructure, in which concepts such as passive revolution function as exploratory searchlights to reveal tendencies within the process of revolution and counter-revolution, has been a contested topic of scholarly debate.⁷ In this volume the contributions of Anne Alexander and Sameh Naguib and of Cemal Burak Tansel critically engage with De Smet's understanding and deployment of passive revolution and Caesarism, drawing on their extensive knowledge of, respectively, the Egyptian and Ottoman/Turkish historical trajectories. Both the innovative ideas formulated in *Gramsci on Tahrir* and their criticisms offer an important methodological contribution to the studies of revolution and restoration.

Furthermore, the book follows approaches that conceive the 'Arab Spring' as a long-term process of revolution and counter-revolution within a broader political-geographical and historical context. This is also the approach taken by Sara Salem in this debate. Salem critically explores De Smet's use of the concept of passive revolution through an insightful discussion of the continuities and discontinuities within Egypt's modern trajectory of socio-economic development and state formation. The *ROAPE* debate is concluded by a detailed rejoinder by De Smet, which addresses the issues raised by the contributors

and restates the significance of utilising Marxist methodologies in studying socio-economic and political change in the peripheries of global capitalism.

Notes

1. Bruff (2014); Fraser (2015). See also the contributions in Tansel (2017).
2. References to the *Prison notebooks* in our contributions are accompanied by the specific notebook number (Q) and section (§) details, which are included in line with the International Gramsci Society's concordance table, available online at <http://www.internationalgramsci.org>.
3. The difference between bourgeois domination and hegemony is not so much the quantitative proportion between coercion and consent, but the degree to which force is successfully grounded in popular consent (see Thomas 2009, 162–165; De Smet and Bogaert 2017, 212). The hegemonic rule of the dominant class can very well rely on a disproportionate use of force (e.g., war, occupation and state violence), as long as this is accepted as necessary and in the interest of the common good by its allies.
4. See Amin and Bush (2014, 112); Amin and Zeilig (2017).
5. See, inter alia, Abdelrahman (2014); Achcar (2013); Alexander and Bassiouny (2014); Beinin (2016) and Marfleet (2016).
6. See Amin and Bush (2014, 112).
7. See, for example, the contributions to the debate published in *Jadaliyya* (Beinin 2013, 2014a, 2014b; De Smet 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

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