

## Gramsci on Tahrir



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Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt

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**Pluto Press**  
[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published 2016 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3558 2 Hardback  
ISBN 978 0 7453 3557 5 Paperback  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1345 5 PDF eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1347 9 Kindle eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1346 2 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England  
Simultaneously printed in the European Union and the United States of America



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# 1. Introduction

Egypt 2011. A small group of activists from a variety of leftist organizations, youth movements, opposition parties, human rights centres, and football clubs has called for a demonstration in Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square) on Tuesday 25 January. The protesters demand 'the sacking of the country's interior minister, the cancelling of Egypt's perpetual emergency law, which suspends basic civil liberties, and a new term limit on the presidency that would bring to an end the 30-year rule of president Hosni Mubarak' (Shenker 2011a). Neither the activists nor the security apparatus really expect the demonstration to attract tens of thousands of ordinary Egyptians, let alone be the herald of a mass uprising (Sowers 2012: 4). After their initial bewilderment, the Central Security Forces (CSF) try to repress the peaceful protests with water cannons, sound bombs, batons, rubber bullets, and tear gas. Demonstrators retaliate with rocks and bricks. Cairo becomes an urban battlefield with unremitting street fights between police forces and thousands of protesters. The protests in Egypt's capital spark off similar demonstrations in Alexandria and in cities in the Delta, the Canal Zone, and Upper Egypt. Throughout the '18 Days' of popular uprising, mass gatherings and violent countermeasures up the ante, transforming the original, tame demands into the revolutionary slogan *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want the fall of the regime).<sup>1</sup> Protesters occupy Tahrir Square, workers strike, and ordinary citizens burn down hated police stations and party offices of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Suddenly people realize they are making a revolution – there is no way back. Pressured by Egypt's panicking elites, Mubarak, Egypt's president since 1981, steps down.

The revolutionary events, first in Tunisia and then in regional heavyweight Egypt, reinvigorated mass emancipatory politics throughout the Middle East and the world at large. Protest movements such as Indignados and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) were directly inspired by the apparent success of the Tahrir occupation. Through Al Jazeera and other (social) media outlets the uprising was literally projected into the living rooms of the global community, offering a powerful, contemporary example of a genuine popular revolution. Whereas alter-globalization and anti-war mobilizations in the decade before 2011 had reinvigorated a critique of capitalism and imperialism, the revolutionary movements



in the Middle East functioned as a salient reminder of the possibility of a spontaneous popular mass movement in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the interpenetration of the political and the social struggle, expressed in the slogan *aysh, horreya, adala egtema'eya* (bread, freedom, social justice) and the material conjunction of political protests and economic strikes underlined the continued validity of Marx's and Trotsky's concept of *permanent revolution* (see Choonara 2011). The workers' movement played a crucial role, not only in disorganizing state power during the final days of Mubarak's rule, but also in the decade-long preparation of the uprising. The insurrection fertilized the organizational seeds of independent trade unionism that were already planted before 2011. New syndicalist formations popped up at the local and national level and every section of the Egyptian working class became involved in strikes and collective actions to defend material livelihoods and the right to organize. Permanent revolution, in its core meaning of a transition from political to social emancipation, was not an empty slogan or wishful thinking, but a real possibility. Additionally, the wave of international protests inspired by Tahrir illustrated the geographic dimension of the 'uninterrupted' revolution. Tahrir came to represent the potential for a global rupture of what Antonio Gramsci called the *duration* of capitalism – the 'empty time' of a social formation that had outlived itself (see Thomas 2009: 152). Duration is history twiddling its thumbs, not in the sense that nothing is going on, but that individual events progress linearly and sequentially, without really becoming entwined and capable of unleashing a transformative dynamic. Conversely, an *epoch* is a 'historical break, in the sense that a whole series of questions which piled up individually ... have precisely formed a "mound", modifying the general structure of the previous process' (Gramsci 1971: 106, Q15§59). Could the events of the 'Arab Spring' – an orientalist misnomer – constitute a new epoch?

Yet by 2015 the outcomes of the Egyptian uprising were all but revolutionary. The military, bureaucratic, and civil security elites from the Mubarak era had reasserted their full control over the state apparatus. The economic structure, based on a neoliberal strategy of accumulation, remained unchanged. After four years the popular movement was, at least momentarily, smothered by a triumphant counter-revolution. However, the most peculiar feature of the ongoing counter-revolution was not its success, but the fact that it had been accomplished on the waves of mass mobilization. The current military strongman, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who was elected president in 2014, came to power through a clever and agile appropriation of the Tamarod (Rebel) campaign, which rallied hundreds of thousands, if not millions of ordinary Egyptians in the streets. The

Egyptian experience raises important questions about the *agency* of counter-revolution, the protagonists of which are able to dislodge the dynamic of permanent revolution and gain popular legitimacy despite the enduring crisis of state and economy.

*Reading (with) Gramsci*

Just a few months after the uprising, Bassem Hassan claimed that ‘the way things have been unfolding since last January resembles more Gramsci’s notion of caesarism than the scenario of a victorious popular revolution’ (Hassan 2011: 4). In this book I hope to shed light on the dynamic of revolution and restoration, not only by ‘reading Gramsci’ to unearth the meaning of central concepts such as hegemony, passive revolution, and Caesarism, but mainly by reading the Egyptian Revolution *with* Gramsci to understand the processes at hand. Conversely, through a discussion of the Egyptian case, I aim to contribute to the field of Gramsci studies and especially to the discussion of his notion of Caesarism, which has not yet been the object of much scholarly debate (see Fontana 2004). Nevertheless, my goal is not to investigate Gramsci’s thought in a genealogical or philological way, but to *deploy* his concepts in order to construct new forms of understanding appropriate to the present. I admit that this approach runs the risk of turning into what Hal Draper (2011a: 21) called ‘quotation-mongering’ and Roccu (2012: 20) ‘a *prêt-à-porter* version of Gramsci’: using decontextualized fragments of the *Prison Notebooks* as sources of authority to ‘prove’ one’s own point. However, such fragments can also be deployed in a less apologetic and a more dialogical way, as conceptual threads that weave together a new narrative, which engages with problems relevant to our time and place. Moreover, as Gramsci himself appears to indicate (Q4§1), there is a coherent leitmotiv or ‘rhythm of thought’ operating throughout the *Prison Notebooks* that transcends its atomistic character. But how are the ideas of a Sardinian Marxist who was politically active almost a century ago relevant for our current day and age?

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), born into a Sardinian middle-class family, joined the Italian Socialist Party in 1913, becoming an editor and journalist. His political views were influenced by socialist and nationalist circles and by the industrialization of Turin, which attracted proletarianized<sup>2</sup> farmers from the Italian South. Building on thinkers such as Antonio Labriola (1843–1904) and Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), Gramsci complemented the ‘vulgar’ Marxism that circulated in the party with a more sophisticated Hegelian outlook. During the First World War Gramsci was active in the organization and education of Turin workers.

After the war, he set up the revolutionary socialist weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) which became the voice of Bolshevik politics in Italy. In 1920, the group around *L'Ordine Nuovo* played a crucial role in assisting the workers' councils that emerged spontaneously during the general strike and factory occupations in Turin in 1919 and 1920. The compromise negotiated between moderate trade union leaders, the Socialist Party, and the state representing the interests of landholders and factory owners not only stabilized the capitalist system for a brief period, but it also blocked the self-emancipatory movement of the Italian working class (Le Blanc 1996: 281). Disillusioned with the reformist policies of the Socialist Party, Gramsci and many other Italian socialists founded the Italian Communist Party in 1921.

Until 1924, the leadership of the party was in the hands of Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970), who was criticized by Lenin in 'Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder' (1920) for his ultra-left politics. Whereas Gramsci advocated a united front against the rise of Fascism, Bordiga insisted on shielding the party from 'bourgeois' influences such as the Socialist Party. In 1924 Gramsci was elected into parliament. In the same year Bordiga was arrested and Gramsci took over the leadership of the Italian Communist Party until he was himself imprisoned in 1926, despite his parliamentary immunity. He remained in prison until 1937, when he died following a deterioration in his already weak health. While imprisoned, he wrote 34 notebooks, which dealt with diverse topics, ranging from political theory, through philosophy, to Italian history.

Only after the Second World War, when the Italian Communist Party published select sections of the *Prison Notebooks*, did Gramsci's ideas begin to circulate. Gramsci's thought was appropriated by the Italian 'Eurocommunist' movement, which sought to anchor its reformist politics in the works of the respected Marxist. In 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' (1976) Perry Anderson famously criticized this reformist instrumentalization of Gramsci's ideas. While defending Gramsci's revolutionary project, Anderson rejected the coherence of his thought, which, due to Fascist censorship, the use of obscure terminology, and its fragmented form, appeared contradictory and multi-interpretable. Recent scholarship, however, has affirmed the internal consistency of Gramsci's concepts (see Thomas 2009).

Gramsci clearly positioned his thought in the debates about the development of capitalism and revolutionary strategy after the First World War. Consequently, he should not be read as a cultural or political 'theorist', but as a *Marxist* concerned with developing a philosophy of praxis: theory as a necessary tool in the emancipatory struggles of subaltern<sup>3</sup> groups. In this regard, Gramsci should be read along with

other Marxists – in the first place Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but also Trotsky, who functions in many ways as a complementary thinker (see Burawoy 1989: 793; Thomas 2015). The starting text for such a reading is Marx's 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' (1859), as Gramsci himself indicated: 'It would seem that the theory of the passive revolution is a necessary critical corollary to the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy' (Gramsci 1971: 114; Q15\$62; see also Gramsci 1971: 106–7; Q15\$7). In the 'Preface' Marx famously claimed that:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.<sup>4</sup> The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure....

No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation. (Marx 1987: 263)

Gramsci's concept of passive revolution directly addressed Marx's general remarks regarding societal *crisis*, *revolution*, and *transformation*. These three concepts serve as threads that tie this book together.

Discarding millenarian interpretations of the First World War and the rise of Fascism, Gramsci transcended the eschatological binary of ‘socialism or barbarism’. Instead of taking capitalist crisis as his main problematic, he tried to comprehend capitalism’s historical stubbornness and agility in the face of its recurring crises. His insights are important to our understanding of the persistence of capitalism today, despite the ongoing political and economic crisis of its current, neoliberal form. Arguably, his concept of passive revolution stands at the centre of such an analysis, functioning as the conceptual antipode of permanent revolution (see Thomas 2015).

### *Outline*

After this introductory first chapter I have organized the book into two parts. Readers are warned that Gramsci arrives in Egypt only in the second part of the book. Part I, ‘On the Subject of Revolution’, offers a theoretical discussion of Gramsci’s concepts of passive revolution and Caesarism, whereas Part II, ‘Gramsci in Egypt’, engages with the specific case of the Egyptian revolution. When I was writing ‘On the Subject of Revolution’ I chose not to present Gramsci’s ‘theory’ in a schematic, ‘logical’ manner, but instead to let the concepts emerge organically as part of a historical narrative about the constitution of the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois society. The goal here is not to present the past, but to evoke the rich, historical concreteness from which Gramsci distilled his concepts. Chapter 2, ‘From Bourgeois to Permanent Revolution’, kicks off the story by discussing the English and French trajectories of ‘bourgeois revolution’. Concepts such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘intellectuals’ are, for example, explained by bringing them into the orbit of Jacobinism. The chapter ends with a comment on Marx’s notion of the revolution ‘in permanence’, which delivers a historical promise that remained unfulfilled. This sets the stage for the next chapter, ‘A Criterion for Interpretation’, which is devoted entirely to the concept of passive revolution. I closely follow Gramsci’s narration of the ‘Risorgimento’, the unification of Italy, in order to arrive at his passive-revolutionary interpretation of the process of Italian state formation. I continue with his extension of the concept to the domain of the constitution of European capitalism in general. Subsequently, I illuminate Gramsci’s application of the interpretative criterion of passive revolution to the process of the *reconstitution* of capitalism as a means of understanding its stubborn survival. Attention is paid to imperialism, Fascism, and Fordism/Americanism as global reconfigurations of existing historical blocs that temporarily displace both the fettering of productive forces and

the threat of social revolution. At this point Gramsci's understanding of passive revolution as a critical corollary to Marx's 'Preface' shows its true significance. Finally, I pose the question of whether neoliberalism can be interpreted from the perspective of passive revolution, critically engaging with scholars who suggest that neoliberal counter-reform is of a different order. I suggest that we should take seriously Gramsci's own definition of passive revolution as *a criterion of interpretation*, and deploy it accordingly.

Chapter 4, 'Caesarism', returns to the question of revolution. I explore the meaning of revolution and conclude that the Marxist tradition contains both an objectivist and subjectivist perspective, which respectively focus on the external outcomes and internal dynamics of the process. I use the subjectivist angle to re-approach the concept of permanent revolution as the development of social emancipation from the conditions of political emancipation. The difference between political and social emancipation also brings us back to the problem of the state. With a brief sidetrack into Hegel, which is interpellated by Gramsci's use of the terms 'mechanical' and 'organic', I differentiate between a mechanical, chemical, and organic relation between state and class. This distinction will prove crucial in my discussion of bourgeois hegemony and Caesarism in particular. Before I can move to Gramsci's concept of Caesarism, I address Marx's notion of Bonapartism, concentrating on the rule of Napoleon III. This clears the way for Gramsci's treatment of the topic, which expands on Marx's understanding by discerning qualitative and quantitative, progressive and reactionary, classic and modern, military and civil variants. I finish the chapter by reflecting on the possibility and desirability of 'progressive' Caesarism. This concludes the first part of the book.

At this point the reader might wonder about the relevancy of the European historical trajectory and the universal applicability of Gramsci's 'Western' concepts to the particular Egyptian case. This is a healthy critical reflex, seeing that liberal, conservative, and socialistic Eurocentrist modernization narratives have functioned as ideological means to subordinate, discipline, and control non-Western societies. The Western modern experience has served as an ideal typical standard that other nations have to follow in order to become 'civilized' and 'developed'. Here, however, a concern for Eurocentrism is misplaced. Before I continue with the structure of the book, I address this issue in a few cursory remarks.

Firstly, with the rise of capitalism and the forceful integration of different parts of the world into the emerging global market economy separate histories became for the first time a shared world history. The universalist concepts that are deployed by Marx and Gramsci to criticize

capitalism are not transcendental categories or products of free-floating thought, but they express the material generalization of capital, both in a spatial and social sense. In other words, their critique does not presume some universalist human essence, modelled on Western premises, but the violent construction of the universal life world of capitalism. This process of universalization does not necessarily encompass a tendency towards cultural and economic homogenization and identity – on the contrary, as explained in Chapter 5, the expansion of capitalism is fundamentally characterized by unevenness, which turns external differences into internal contradictions. Analysing the relation between the Italian North and the South, Gramsci shows his strength as a thinker of unevenness and difference *within* capitalist totality (see Rosengarten 2009). Permanent revolution as a general strategy is only true for capitalism in general; its concrete form as proletarian hegemony has to be developed for each particular form of capitalism. The task of deconstructing orientalism and knowing the ‘Other’ is primarily *political*, practically achieved by forging alliances, organizing solidarity, and struggling together. Consequently, instead of belonging to a culturalist category of reified ‘Western’ thought, Gramsci’s concepts operate as subaltern weapons of emancipation from capital, which have to be *translated* to different struggles. As I point out in Chapter 3, this idea of ‘translation’ was very important to Gramsci.

Secondly, a clear distinction should be made between the normative thesis that capitalist modernity is intrinsically Western and should be emulated by non-Western nations, and the analytical argument that the capitalist mode of production originated in the West. The first statement is Eurocentrist; the second one not necessarily so. Some critical authors, especially from the dependency school or operating in a world-system analysis framework, find the idea that ‘capitalism’ originated historically in Western Europe (or, more specifically, England) and ‘diffused’ from there already Eurocentric and a form of colonizing thought (for example Blaut 1993; 1999). They understand the ‘Western origin thesis’ as a colonial view of Europe’s civilizational superiority and exceptionalism. Often their rejection of this thesis includes a – correct – acknowledgment of the role of pre-industrial colonialism and global developments in the rise of capitalism, and/or a – less correct – assertion that other countries were well on their way to developing a capitalism of their own until this autonomous movement was blocked by colonialism. However, from a Marxian perspective, such a comprehension of capitalism is problematic as it equates commercialization, the amassing of wealth, the expansion of the world market, and the presence of money capital to the capitalist mode of production, not distinguishing between the conditions, obstacles, and stimulants for the emergence of capitalism

and the process of the actual becoming and subsequent development of this new social form (see Wood 2007). I return to this point in the next chapter. Moreover, the final chapters of Marx's *Capital* make the point that capitalism's originating in England was nothing to be proud of and did not reflect any civilizational superiority – quite the contrary. In any case, despite our normative rejection of the colonial and imperialist expansion of capitalism, we cannot deny the very fact of its historical 'diffusion' – and the diffusion or translation of many concepts and practices of struggle of Western subaltern groups by non-Western actors. For example, the French Revolution is important to Egyptian history because it has become an integral part of its own trajectory (and vice versa), shaping both elite and subaltern goals, methods, and discourses.

Returning to the book, the second section, 'Gramsci in Egypt', looks at the 25 January Revolution from a long-duration perspective, working its way upwards from the nineteenth century to 2015. Gramsci's concepts are deployed to gain an insight into Egypt's historical trajectory and, conversely, the story of Egypt's past and present is told in order to render his theory concrete and enter into dialogue with other Marxists. Chapter 5, 'Passive Revolution and Imperialism', begins with an overview of Egypt's gradual subordination to British imperialism. I take a moment to explain Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development and permanent revolution, which show an emancipatory way out of the Scylla and Charybdis of 'too much' and 'too little' capitalist development. Yet, the survival of a reconfigured colonial historical bloc after Egypt's 1919 revolution also necessitates the interpretative criterion of passive revolution for understanding this episode. The phase of national capitalism between the 1920s and 1940s is found wanting, incapable of solving the tasks of the 'bourgeois revolution'. A new organic crisis is building up, coming to the surface after the Second World War in the form of an explosion of protests and strikes. I close the chapter with a few general remarks on the relation between passive revolution and imperialism. The following chapter, 'Lineages of Egyptian Caesarism', opens with a flash forward to February 2011 and the 'soft coup' of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). The capacity of the Egyptian military to displace popular initiative is retraced to the historical lineage of Nasserism. The debate about the character of Nasserism leads me to the concepts of 'deflected permanent revolution' and 'proletarian Bonapartism'. Then I return to the Egyptian case, discussing the limits of the Nasserist project and its subsequent demise in the late 1960s and 1970s. I conclude with a reflection on the various 'shades' of passive revolution.

I start Chapter 7, 'The 25 January Revolution', with a detailed account of the form that the global neoliberal offensive took in Egypt. I return



to the discussion in Chapter 4 about the character of revolution and I briefly describe the political and social movements that prepared the way for the 25 January uprising. Next I give a description of the flow of events during the 18 Days, which is followed by an analysis of ‘The Republic of Tahrir’ from a subjectivist perspective. I end the chapter with a discussion of the unfulfilled potential of the Egyptian revolution to become permanent. Chapter 8, ‘Revolution and Restoration’, functions as the negative of Chapter 7, drawing a sober picture of the success of the counter-revolution and highlighting its bourgeois–democratic and Caesarist forms. I return to Gramsci’s point that hegemony is the concrete form of permanent revolution by glimpsing the actors and methods of struggle that are able to turn the tide. In the final chapter I summarize the main argument of the book and look at revolution, restoration, and Caesarism beyond Tahrir.

#### *Practical Remarks*

Arabic words, names, and places have been transcribed in a simplified system that reflects their Egyptian colloquial variants and that conforms to their popular appearance in non-specialist sources (such as the media).

References to Gramsci’s *Quaderni del Carceri* (*Prison Notebooks*) follow the format of Valentino Gerratana’s 1975 critical edition, of which Notebooks 1–5 have been translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg. For instance, ‘Q3§2’ means *quaderno* (notebook) 3, section 2. Whenever possible the concordant fragment in the *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, has been indicated in the reference.