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## DEBATE

**Rejoinder: reading *Tahrir in Gramsci***

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**SUMMARY**

De Smet's rejoinder to the *ROAPE* debate addresses the conceptual, analytical and historical questions posed by the contributors.

Criticism is the greatest form of praise, because it means that people take you seriously enough to engage with your argument. I am grateful that such excellent scholars as Anne Alexander, Cemal Burak Tansel, Roberto Roccu, Sameh Naguib and Sara Salem have taken the time and effort to comment on my work. Their invaluable feedback has advanced my analysis of the process of revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt. In this reply I will not be able to engage with all their remarks. Ultimately it will be upon the reader of the book to carefully decide whether the arguments hold or not. In this contribution I focus on four central issues, which are significant for revolutionary politics in and beyond the African continent: passive revolution; Caesarism; the Brotherhood; and hegemony.

**Passive revolution: criterion or model?**

In *Gramsci on Tahrir* (De Smet 2016a), I investigate the dynamic of revolution and restoration in Egypt by reading Gramsci 'on Tahrir' and, conversely, I locate the experience of the Egyptian revolution within Gramsci's writings. Hence the book offers both a specific 'Gramscian' understanding of the process of revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt and a reappraisal and reinterpretation of key Gramscian categories, such as hegemony, passive revolution, and Caesarism. Roberto Roccu (in this issue) discerns that at the heart of my research lies the same question Gramsci struggled with: how is capitalism able to survive its own recurrent organic crises? Notions such as hegemony, passive revolution and Caesarism probe into the agency and agility of ruling classes to deflect and absorb subaltern opposition and problematise the conditions for successful proletarian strategies against/within developed capitalist states. As such, Gramsci's thought remains relevant today to understand ruling classes' attempts to transform forms of accumulation, production, labour, and state power in order to escape the current crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Conversely, a world-historical and global outlook de-orientalises Egypt (see Roccu and Salem, both in this issue), moving our understanding beyond the 'peculiar modalities of the region' (*pace* Achcar 2013) by putting the nation's trajectory firmly within the context of contemporary imperialism, neoliberalism, and uneven and combined development (see Hanieh 2013).

The core concept of the book is passive revolution, which captures ‘the persistent capacity of initiative of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce socio-political transformations, sometimes of significance, conserving securely in its own hands power, initiative and hegemony, and leaving the working classes in their condition of subalternity’ (Losurdo in Thomas 2009, 197). In spite of the adjective ‘passive’ this process of ‘revolution–restoration’ does not exclude sudden outbursts of street politics ‘from below’ and even mass uprisings. Faced with the stubborn survival of capitalism after the revolutionary episode of 1917 and its rebirth in Fordism and Fascism, Gramsci formulated his theory of passive revolution as a ‘critical corollary’ to Marx’s *Preface to A contribution to the critique of political economy* (1987 [1859]). Put simply, what if, indeed, the relations of production were ‘fettering’ the productive forces and ‘an era of social revolution’ ensued, but the revolutionary proletariat was unable to conquer and transform capitalist state power? Could this period of non-transition lead to anything else than the apocalyptic choice between ‘socialism or barbarism’?

Gramsci turned to the Risorgimento, the unification of Italy, as a historical case study to ‘work out’ the concept of passive revolution, which, in turn, allowed him to understand the emergence of Fascism (66–67).<sup>1</sup> Therefore ‘passive revolution’ is not a clearly delineated political form, situated somewhere ‘in between’ revolution and restoration. It is in Gramsci’s own words a ‘criterion of interpretation’: a methodological searchlight that reveals the agency, agility, and adaptability of dominant groups, which are able to survive their own hegemonic crises. Thus a nation’s history can be comprehended as a series of discrete revolutionary and passive-revolutionary episodes that are incorporated within long-term transformations of global capitalism. *Gramsci on Tahrir* offers such a reading of Egypt’s modern history through the lens of its revolutionary upheavals and their displacements: the 1882 Urabi uprising; the 1919 revolution; the 1952 Free Officer coup; the 1977 ‘bread riots’; and the recent mass movements. As Sara Salem (this issue) remarks, one of the main functions of the concepts of passive revolution and Caesarism (see below) is to tease out the continuities and discontinuities of Egypt’s particular trajectory within the development of global capitalism.

Although I ground my deployment of passive revolution within a reading of Gramsci that is informed by the latest scholarship (see the introduction of this special issue), my use of the concept is not uncontested. Tansel (this issue) claims that it ‘remains underdeveloped’ and, as a consequence, I rely too much on an overextended notion of Caesarism. With regard to passive revolution our disagreement appears almost semantic. Tansel asserts ‘passive revolutions as concrete historical episodes of blocked revolutionary upheavals and class strategies that result in the constitution or reproduction of the capitalist mode of production,’ while I suggest that such concrete historical episodes can be *understood through* the concept of passive revolution: ‘a historical process for which the concept of passive revolution highlights the various forms in which the dynamic of permanent revolution is replaced by initiative from above’ (168). This is exactly how Gramsci deployed the concept, not as a model,<sup>2</sup> but as a criterion of interpretation to understand the different historical episodes of the Risorgimento and Fascism within the longer history of Italy.

The discussion about Egypt’s 1919 revolution is instructive in this regard. Both Tansel and Alexander and Naguib (Alexander and Naguib, this issue) criticise my understanding

of this episode as ‘a passive revolution’ because there was no successful transformation or entrenchment of capitalist relations. However, this interpretation is only a problem from *their* view of passive revolution as a specific model of transition to modernity. I am not convinced by their critique that the use of passive revolution as a methodological search-light instead of a taxonomic ‘model’ ‘blocks an appreciation of the “specific class strategies and spatial practices that characterize capitalist society and how these have changed with the further development of capitalism”’ (Tansel, this issue). On the contrary, as Salem highlights (this issue), the concept of passive revolution allows us to understand the role that conservative landlords, commercial capitalists, the monarchy and British capital played, *wanted* to play and *failed* to play in the process of Egyptian state formation. Using passive revolution as a criterion for interpretation instead of a model reveals passive-revolutionary tendencies operating in historically contingent times – tendencies that might not succeed in their attempts at ‘modernisation from above’. In Egypt, neither the permanent-revolutionary nor passive-revolutionary tendencies were able to determine the outcome of the crisis of the colonial system, and it was specifically this enduring societal stalemate that created the need and the opening for the Nasserist Caesarist intervention of 1952.

## Caesarism

Concerning Caesarism, Alexander and Naguib reprimand me for reducing Egypt’s history to a series of Caesars, eliding the role of subaltern resistance, thus sending a message of defeat and despair to the Egyptian masses. However, as I explain in the foreword of the book:

Whereas most of my previous work has focused on the agency of the workers’ movement and the persistent possibility of emancipation,<sup>3</sup> this book explores the theme of their continuous negation. Although the situation in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world may seem bleak at the moment, my central message is one of hope, not despair. The history of Egypt shows many instances of strong, emancipatory movements from below. (x)

Moreover, as Roccu (this issue) points out, an important part of the book consists of defending a subjectivist understanding of revolution that places class struggle and subaltern subject formation at the heart of the analysis (72–86).

Unsurprisingly, I reject Salem’s ‘objectivist’ appraisal of the Nasserist era. Salem writes that:

De Smet argues that the Free Officer coup of 1952 represents an example of Caesarism, and that without Nasser’s intervention a true social revolution may have happened. I argue that this understanding of 1952 ignores the important fact that by dismantling the agrarian fraction of capital, the Nasserist bloc paved the way for the possibility of structural reform that in the long run would have been better for labour. (Salem, this issue)

In contradistinction, my political premise is that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’ (Marx 1985 [1867], 441) and cannot be handed out from above by enlightened elites, vanguards, or states (cf. Roccu, this issue). Less than a month in power, the Free Officer government violently repressed a strike at Kafr al-Dawwar, hanging two worker leaders (Beinin and Lockman 1987, 418). Strikes and independent worker actions were prohibited. Notwithstanding improved

living conditions, the destruction of its autonomous syndicalist and political organisations reduced the Egyptian working class to an economic-corporate state and a position of subalternity in the Nasserist state. Contextualising Nasserism within the struggle for national liberation and development should enhance our understanding of this episode, but not offer authoritarianism any political excuses. The history of African liberation movements clearly shows the emancipatory limits of top-down, state-led sovereignty, development and social justice.

Tansel, on the other hand, claims that I reduce ‘passive revolution into a mere methodological criterion to analyse various forms of Caesarisms’. I think this is an unfair assessment of the complexity of my analysis of Caesarism, which consists of two layers. The first one is a ‘generic hypothesis, a sociological schema (convenient for the art of politics)’ (Gramsci 1971, 221, Q13§27), which entails the intervention of a ‘third force’ in the class struggle, subjugating both sides of the conflict. Gramsci creates a typology of Caesarisms, distinguishing ‘progressive’ from ‘reactionary’, ‘qualitative’ from ‘quantitative’, ‘classical’ from ‘modern’ Caesarism (96–99). This ‘schema’ is useful as a starting point to analyse Egyptian class relations in the 1940s, the intervention of the Free Officers in 1952, and the nation’s subsequent trajectory of ‘deflected permanent revolution’ (149–156).<sup>4</sup> However, Gramsci takes the concept of Caesarism much further than a simple typology of state forms – an analysis which is more in line with Marx’s writings on Bonapartism. The development of the capitalist state after the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871 turned Caesarism into a *permanent civil characteristic* of bourgeois hegemony, as state bureaucracies and even democratic coalition governments could be understood as a ‘first stage of Caesarism’ (99–100; Gramsci 1971, 212, 220, 228, Q3§119, Q13§23, §27). Instead of an authoritarian aberration, Caesarism appears as the naked relation between the bourgeois class and the capitalist state – as the essence of bourgeois hegemony.

Marx mentions how the political revolution of the French bourgeoisie in 1789 created

a moment in which this class fraternises and fuses with society in general, becomes identified with it and is experienced and acknowledged as its universal representative; a moment in which its claims and rights are truly the rights and claims of society itself and in which it is in reality the heart and head of society. (Marx 1992, 254)

Similarly, Gramsci commented that

[t]he previous ruling classes were essentially conservative in the sense that they did not tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e., to enlarge their class sphere ‘technically’ and ideologically: their conception was that of a closed class. The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. (Gramsci 1971, 260, Q8§2)

The French Revolution destroyed the ‘mechanical’ ensemble of feudal society, which consisted of self-contained corporate estates. Whereas feudal dominant classes ruled society almost ‘from the outside’, the bourgeoisie ruled by *becoming* society and, conversely, by offering other classes a pathway to become bourgeois. The promise of an ‘organic passage’ of the broad population to the bourgeois class has been capitalism’s mobilising myth, functioning as the origin of the bourgeoisie’s hegemony – and of its systemic crisis: ‘The parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of majorities; how shall the great majorities outside parliament not want to decide?’ (Marx 1979 [1852], 142).



In its most radical, Jacobin, moment, the French Revolution already showed the fundamental contradiction at the heart of bourgeois hegemony: the promise of an organic passage of the whole of society into the state can never be fulfilled. Nevertheless, Gramsci himself remained ambiguous about the organic quality of bourgeois leadership, positing a political homology between 'bourgeois' Jacobin and 'proletarian' Leninist class leadership. Echoing Marx, Gramsci is keen to point out that the progressive role of the bourgeoisie is already exhausted in the revolutions of 1848, as it began to forge alliances with *Ancien Régime* elites against the emerging proletariat and the spectre of social revolution. However, one could argue that the French Revolution's radical Jacobin moment, which created the myth of a bourgeois organic passage, was already transgressing the bourgeoisie's traditional strategy of class rule. Compromise, co-optation, fragmentation of the opposition, and molecular, gradual change engineered 'from above' – i.e., passive revolution – appear as the true hallmarks of capitalist state formation. Political forms that appear historically as aberrations of bourgeois class rule – Bonapartist or Caesarist régimes – are in fact the purest expressions of bourgeois state power. Marx did not conceive of the Bonapartism and empire-crafting of Napoleon III as a regression to a pre-bourgeois phase, but as a development of modern capitalist class power. For the bourgeoisie it was much easier to be a ruling class that appeared to suffer the shared fate of all classes in society – to be subjugated in equal measure by state power – than to face the reality of being a class that in a cowardly manner refrained from completing its own democratic project. Thus, the political dispossession of the bourgeoisie from direct state power guaranteed its class power. Likewise, Gramsci considered Fascism and parliamentary forms of 'civil Caesarism' as modern expressions of bourgeois domination. Instead of just one of the many political *forms* of the rule of capital, Caesarism/Bonapartism appears as its *inner truth*.

Henceforth, the concept of Caesarism highlights that forms of populism, authoritarianism and outright dictatorship are not expressions of an 'incomplete' or 'backward' capitalism, but the naked essence of capitalist state power. In the metropolis, Caesarism remains hidden, wrapped in the apparatus of the political state and its promise of an organic passage into bourgeois society – until the political parties, associations and personnel of the bourgeoisie are no longer recognised as capable of leading society either by subaltern groups or the ruling classes themselves (De Smet 2016c).

## The Muslim Brotherhood

The deposal of President Muhammad Morsi in 2013 has been framed by scholars and activists as a missed opportunity of democratic transition (see, for example, Wickham 2013). Witnessing the massacre of Brotherhood sympathisers at Rabea al-Adawiya and the increasingly authoritarian leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi it is understandable that the brief episode of Morsi's presidency evoked the feeling of a missed chance to build a real alternative. Yet this nostalgia for the lesser evil is dangerous, because it underestimates the counter-revolutionary character of Morsi's presidency and Islamism in general. I concur with Gilbert Achcar's observation in his book *Morbid symptoms* (2016) that the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) did not entail a 'democratic transition' (Achcar 2016, 6) and that the region faces a



three cornered struggle: not a binary confrontation between revolution and counter-revolution ... but a triangular conflict between one revolutionary pole and two rival counter-revolutionary camps – the regional ancient régime and its reactionary antagonists – both equally inimical to the emancipatory aspirations of the ‘Arab Spring’. (Achcar 2016, 10)

230 The failure of the revolutionary camp to organise itself led to the foregrounding of the conflict between the two wings of the counter-revolution: authoritarian regimes and reactionary Islamist movements (Achcar 2016, 11).

In this regard, Alexander and Naguib are too forgiving of the Brotherhood episode and too optimistic about the potential for democratic reform of Egypt’s ‘deep state’ –  
235 the persistent ensemble of military, bureaucratic and security elites, institutions and networks that make up the core of state power. Despite their outspoken adherence to the logic and strategy of permanent revolution there remains an element of stagism in their appreciation of the revolutionary momentum: an acceptance of limited (political) reform in the short term, as this would open up room for a more profound institutional and social change in the long term. Alexander and Naguib underline that after the demobilisation of Tahrir the revolutionary movement was still able to put pressure on state structures through occupying the square, arguing that my account ‘understates the degree to which the continuing vertical pressure from below between February and November 2011 constrained the room for manoeuvre of all the different fractions of the ruling class and their allies’. In fact, I *do* agree that popular mobilisation was able to pressurise the regime: in the book I give the example of how protesters at Tahrir succeeded in replacing Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq with Essam Sharaf, on 3 March 2011, and how throughout 2011 mass demonstrations at the square forced concessions from the regime (208). Nevertheless, I also point out that the revolutionary movement went through some qualitative changes since the 18 Days of the mass uprising. Despite regular mobilisations Tahrir gradually lost its impact and its role as focal point of the revolution. Demonstrations and occupations increasingly became empty rituals, while the real revolutionary struggle continued in a geographically and socially fragmented way: in the workplaces and neighbourhoods. These embryonic sites of popular self-governance should have been the main terrain for revolutionary politics for they represented emergent dual power, with the long-term potential of challenging the deep state.  
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Alexander and Naguib do not deny the importance of this grassroots struggle, but they claim that ‘For many, participating in the elections represented a dual perspective in which strikes, demonstrations and occupations would interact with the more restricted struggles of elections and parliamentary politics.’ However, in practice participation in elections and referenda organised by the regime *weakened* the revolutionary forces. Alexander and Naguib consider the phase of so-called democratic transition between 2011 and 2012, culminating in the Morsi presidency, as entailing some real reforms ‘such as relatively free and fair elections, de facto rights to form political parties and trade unions, and the emergence of a mainstream media prepared to give platform to a wide range of political viewpoints’. They castigate leftists who do not wish to engage with ‘the demands (universal suffrage, the secret ballot, convocation of the constituent assembly) and the processes and institutions themselves’ of bourgeois democracy, putting themselves in diametrical opposition to Roccu, who argues that ‘demands of political equality around the concept of citizenship would provide a brake, more than an enabler, for the social revolution.’  
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I obviously agree with Alexander and Naguib that democratic reforms should not be rejected *in principle*, for they safeguard the political rights of citizens and open up new possibilities for protest. Yet their relevance has to be derived from the political context in which they are conceded. In Egypt the very idea of ‘democratic transition’ has played a nefarious role in demobilising, dividing, deflecting and destroying the revolutionary movement. It offered political and economic elites a means to channel recalcitrant popular will into representational structures and procedures that could be circumscribed and controlled. Thus, the authoritarian dimension of counter-revolution – open and violent repression of revolutionary groups and movements and sexual intimidation of female activists – was complemented with a ‘counter-revolution in democratic form’: elections, constitution-making, the cosmetic reform of state institutions, and so on. The space of ‘revolutionary politics’ was relocated from the streets and workplaces to the controlled domain of the state. From a passive-revolutionary perspective, Morsi deflected popular initiative by presenting himself as the prime defender of revolutionary demands, without, at the same time, endangering the essential interests of the military and the security apparatus. Instead of ‘smashing’ the authoritarian state apparatus, democratic reform left the structures of the deep state intact. Moreover, the focus on formal democratic procedure and representation severed the connection between the aims of the political opposition and the social demands of workers, peasants and the urban poor (see also Rocca, this issue). Finally, by controlling the pace and agenda of elections and referenda, the regime created and encouraged cleavages within the revolutionary camp – especially the sectarian divide between ‘secularists’ and ‘Islamists’ (De Smet 2016b).

Although the Muslim Brotherhood contained revolutionary layers, especially within its youth wing, as an organisation and movement it belonged squarely within the counter-revolutionary camp. Alexander and Naguib recognise that the Brotherhood ‘is a contradictory organisation, mainly based in the traditional petty bourgeoisie and its educated urban professional faction’, but they downplay its character as a bourgeois and capitalist force, confusing its *social* base for its *class* base. Since the 1970s the leadership of the Brotherhood consists of the so-called Islamic bourgeoisie, a layer of capitalists which is primarily involved in commercial and financial activities (Springborg 1989, 236; Achcar 2013, 278ff). Brotherhood leaders such as the millionaire Khayrat al-Shater illustrate the *class* base of the organisation. Through its religious discourse, its parliamentary opposition, its militancy within the professional syndicates, its charity work – i.e., its strong presence in civil and political society – the Brotherhood has attracted petty-bourgeois and declassed groups to its cause, enlarging its *social* base far beyond the limits of its bourgeois class base. This means, as Alexander and Naguib stress, that the Brotherhood is not ‘simply’ a faction of the ruling class. It is possible that some of its members may be won over to the side of revolution. In fact, the combination of a capitalist class base and a broad middle-class social base is the reason why the Muslim Brotherhood represents a qualitatively *different* wing of the counter-revolution, which cannot be reduced to ‘the regime’.

However, Alexander and Naguib engage in a bit of sophistry when they argue that the Muslim Brothers were not a faction of the ruling class because they could not get a foothold in the state apparatus and were easily ejected from power. If not capitalist, to which class do millionaire Brothers such as Khayrat al-Shater belong? Taking the exclusion of the Brotherhood from the commanding heights of state power as proof for its exclusion from the ruling class presumes a mechanical relation between class and state and a

proportionate representation of each class fraction in the state apparatus. The fact that the Brotherhood was busying itself with capturing positions in the cabinet, ministries, state unions and professional associations instead of transforming the structures of dictatorship into institutions of bourgeois democracy (Pioppi 2013, 63ff) indicates that it was seeking to improve its position *within* the ruling stratum (see Teti and Gervasio 2012). Conversely, the subsequent ejection of Muslim Brothers from positions of power and the sequestration of their assets represented the political and economic cannibalisation of one fraction of the ruling class by the rest. In the final analysis the political competition between the Brotherhood, the generals, the security apparatus and other capitalist factions was not about democracy or dictatorship, neoliberalism or state capitalism, but about which class fraction would become politically dominant and reap the most rentier benefits of neoliberal accumulation.

### Prefiguration and hegemony

The brief ‘democratic’ episode during the presidency of Muhammad Morsi illustrates the impossibility of ‘democratisation’ without the revolutionary overthrow of the ‘deep state’ and a fundamental change of power relations – not only within Egypt, but also between national and regional and international forces (e.g., the USA, Europe, Israel and Saudi Arabia). The specific and local process of counter-revolution in Egypt is part of a general and global process of capitalist crisis and resistance. The need to integrate political and social movements and local, national, regional and global struggles is the need to make ‘permanent’ the character of the Arab uprisings and the Egyptian revolution in particular. All revolutions – in the sense of mass mobilisations from below contesting existing state power – contain a ‘social soul’, even if they end up merely reconfiguring political relations: they display concrete emancipatory practices that prefigure new social forms within the womb of capitalism. Functioning as passive revolution’s mirror heuristic, the concept of permanent revolution teases out the immanent social soul in a nation’s historical trajectory. In the case of Egypt, Tahrir is revealed as something much more than a ‘democratic’ struggle against dictatorship. A desire for social justice and human dignity coincided with practices of popular self-organisation, which embodied the seeds of an alternative society based on equality, diversity, cooperation and joyful labour. Tahrir challenged the orientalist, paternalist view that Arab and African countries are still ‘catching up’ to Western modernity. The self-organisation of the masses represented an embryonic society that was already moving beyond the restricted paradigm of bourgeois, representative democracy. Hence any ‘stage theory’ or ‘transitology’ that demands the construction of a national (bourgeois) democratic framework *before* any radical social reforms are implemented is inherently reactionary. The imaginary of Tahrir galvanised groups in Europe and the US, which asserted not only the geographical character of the ‘permanent revolution’ that was taking place, but also the ability of revolutionary masses in ‘backward’ nations to pose the most radical and advanced solutions to the problems of global capitalism (De Smet 2016b).

As Rocca highlights in this issue, the political necessity and historical immanence of permanent revolution remains an empty promise if subaltern groups cannot acquire hegemony. In my book I suggest that Tahrir had to turn itself ‘inside out’. Its revolutionary ‘governance’ had to be shared with neighbourhoods and workplaces all over Egypt.

Tahrir had to become not only a prefiguration of an alternative society, but the hegemonic apparatus of the revolutionary movement, connecting itself to the struggles waged by the popular masses outside its borders, developing its imaginary into national leadership. This is a process of collective subject formation, in which the development of adequate ‘super-structures’ – organisation, ideology, traditions, practices and common sense – plays a key role (see Roccu, this issue).

However, Roccu advances a static view of alliance-forging when he claims that some of the subaltern groups ‘lie beyond the reach and scope of a subaltern bloc under the hegemony of the working class’. With regard to organisation, from the beginning of the uprising, a continuous exchange had taken place between the occupiers at Tahrir and protesters from other Cairo neighbourhoods and from provincial and even rural areas. The 18 Days constituted a pivotal moment as the occupation of Tahrir brought different geographical and social groups together under the umbrella of opposition against ‘the system’. Peasants who were not able to return home when the regime closed the roads joined in the protests at Tahrir (El-Nour 2015, 203). The role of peasants in the process of revolution and counter-revolution has often been assessed negatively. Alexander and Naguib, for example, comment that the countryside has been ‘one of the most important social reservoirs from which the major reformist Islamist movements and the military-led counter-revolution mobilised’. While this is empirically true, this should not lead us to a categorisation of peasants as *essentially* a social reservoir for counter-revolution. In the late 1990s, peasants were among the first subaltern groups to begin protesting against the effects of neoliberal accumulation, such as increasing land rents; dispossession of lands; concentration of landed capital. Their demonstrations, sit-ins and land occupations were violently repressed by the state in league with opposition parties ranging from the *Wafd* to the Muslim Brotherhood (De Smet 2015, 286ff). Yet their protests were largely ignored by urban middle-class political activists (El-Nour 2015, 202). The reason that peasants constituted a social base for the counter-revolution had arguably less to do with their ‘objectively’ reactionary character, flowing from the uneven development of the countryside, than with the inability and unwillingness of revolutionary actors to engage with their problems and forge alliances.

I agree with Roccu that the way in which subaltern groups perceive themselves is important and that an ‘engagement with common sense is a fundamental stepping stone of the road to subaltern hegemony.’ In *A dialectical pedagogy of revolt* (2015) I have written extensively on the role of ‘common sense’ within the process of collective subject formation and hegemony. Within the common sense of people there is already a ‘healthy nucleus’, a good sense: ‘a form of practical activity or will in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical “premiss”’ (Gramsci 1971, 328). Not grand theories, but this ‘good sense’ is the starting point for building a revolutionary consciousness: ‘it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making “critical” an already existing activity’ (Gramsci 1971, 331). After the 25 January uprising the problem was not an absence of ‘good sense’. The slogans of freedom, bread and social justice during the 18 Days, or, subsequently, the demand for *tathir*, the ‘cleansing’ of the state apparatus from Mubarakists (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 211ff), strongly expressed the ‘good sense’ of the revolution. As Roccu remarks, the main issue was the connection of this ‘good sense’ with critical theories that explained the inner connections between diverse

forms of exploitation, oppression and domination experienced by different subaltern groups. The democratic, but abstract idea of ‘the people’ has to be grounded in the concrete class experiences of the broad population, and the geographically and socially fragmented class conflicts have to be generalised as a shared, popular struggle. This, in turn, required national political organisations capable of transcending economic-corporate interests and socio-geographical boundaries – a ‘Modern Prince’ in Gramsci’s jargon (De Smet 2015, 84–88).

Through the criterion of passive revolution, it becomes clear that the counter-revolutionary forces, and especially the military, were able to preserve state power, regain the initiative and deflect the revolutionary process – chiefly by obstructing the organic building of a national, revolutionary organisation. Pressured by movements from below, direct state repression was complemented with the lightning conductor of ‘democratic reform’; with the temporary cooptation of popular leaders such as presidential hopeful Hamdeen Sabahi and trade unionist Kamal Abu Eita or mass movements such as Tadamon; and with a hysterical hypernationalism based on the violent exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the face of the grim balance sheet of the Egyptian revolution – and the Arab uprisings in general – we may wish to ‘read Tahrir in Gramsci’ and invert the Italian Marxist’s famous aphorism that he’s ‘a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will’: our current despair is contained by our rational understanding that revolutionary episodes such as Tahrir have been able to shed the yoke of capitalist class and state power in the past, and that they inevitably will do so again in the future.

## Notes

1. Where otherwise unattributed, all page references refer to my work under discussion, De Smet 2016a.
2. Tansel quotes Gramsci ‘Can this “model” for the creation of the modern states be repeated in other conditions?’ (*‘Questo «modello» della formazione degli Stati moderni può ripetersi in altre condizioni?’*) (Gramsci 1971, 115, Q10II§61) to support his claim that Gramsci advanced ‘passive revolutionary transitions as a “model” of producing capitalist hegemony’. However, I would argue that Gramsci puts ‘*modello*’ in quotation marks *precisely because* the uncritical use of ‘model’ leads to a catch-all concept of capitalist transition.
3. De Smet (2012); Zemni, De Smet and Bogaert (2013); De Smet (2014); De Smet (2015).
4. While I accept Tansel’s insightful additions to my brief analysis of Turkey, I fail to see the opposition between comprehending 1908 as a revolution and analysing Kemalism as its Bonapartist result. In fact, the inability of the revolutionary movements ‘to coalesce into organisations/movements with defined goals and effective strategies that could effect long-term social change’ (Tansel, this issue) typically anticipates a Caesarist outcome.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Note on contributor

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