



THE PRINCE AND THE MINOTAUR

EGYPT IN THE LABYRINTH OF COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Brecht De Smet

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the study of Egypt's 25 January Revolution and to a more general understanding of revolutions and counter-revolutions. I turn to Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, passive revolution, and the Modern Prince to understand the weakness of revolutionary subjectivity. Moreover, I argue that the concept of *prefiguration* serves as a critical addendum to Gramsci's discussion of a new emancipatory politics embodied by the Modern Prince. Conversely, Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps us to understand the theoretical and practical limits of prefigurative politics. By presenting the Egyptian counter-revolution as a labyrinthine structure, the paper cautions against simplistic views of reaction and the lure of processes of 'democratic transition' and mass movements 'from above' that derail revolutionary agency from its key, emergent purpose: to develop itself into a social power able to construct the alternative society it imagines.

Introduction

‘The people want the fall of the regime’ was the slogan of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of 2011, invoking popular agency and a collective will opposed to ‘the regime’ or ‘the system’. Zooming in on the trajectory of this popular subject I suggest that the success of the ensuing counter-revolution was due to a deflection, fragmentation, and displacement of revolutionary organisation and agency from 2011 onward. In order to understand the capacity – or lack thereof – of popular power to transform society, I turn to Antonio Gramsci’s (1891–1937) concepts of hegemony, passive revolution and the Modern Prince.¹ The first section of the paper discusses these notions against the background of the historical and contemporary political issues Gramsci wanted to solve. I touch upon Gramsci’s appropriation of Sorel’s myth and Machiavelli’s centaur. Subsequently, I develop Peter Thomas’s suggestion that ‘... the fully developed concept of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* should be understood as a contribution to the development of a prefigurative theory of a politics of another type of the subaltern social groups...’.² I criticise the consequentialist conception of ‘revolution’ and argue that an understanding of revolutionary practice should contain the element of prefiguration. I explain what is meant by prefiguration, very briefly outlining the history of the concept and the views of some of its main proponents. Then I investigate the concrete prefigurative politics of the Egyptian revolution, focusing on the ‘Republic of Tahrir’. In the fourth and fifth part I turn my eye to the counter-revolution and its main actors, discussing the role of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. I present the minotaur as a new political form through which the counter-revolution succeeded in 2013. I conclude the paper with an overview of the weaknesses of the revolutionary subject in Egypt, which were entwined with the strengths of the counter-revolutionary forces, and vice versa. I indicate how this experience can inform and strengthen a political practice that unites prefiguration and hegemony.

Gramsci’s Prince

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has travelled through the disciplines of the social sciences, being interpreted as ruling by consent instead of by force; as the homogenisation of a social group into a political body; as anti-politics; and as geopolitical supremacy. Peter Thomas underlines that these interpretations share a view of hegemony as a *general* theory of political power. Instead, hegemony should be understood as a ‘dialectical chain’ consisting of four ‘moments’: ‘first, hegemony as social and political leadership; second,

¹ References to Gramsci’s *Quaderni del Carcere* (Prison Notebooks) follow Valentino Gerratana’s annotation system (cf. www.internationalgramscisociety.org), whereby Q stands for the notebook number and § indicates the section. Cross-references with the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* are marked by SPN in the text, cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks: Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971). Cross-references with the *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* are indicated by FS, cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks: Edited and translated by Derek Boothman* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995).

² Peter Thomas, ‘Hegemony, Passive Revolution and the Modern Prince’, *Thesis Eleven* 117 no. 1 (2013): 25.

hegemony as a political project; third, the realisation of this hegemonic project in the concrete institutions and organisational forms of a “hegemonic apparatus”; and fourth, ultimately and decisively, the social and political hegemony of the workers’ movement’.³ To be clear: hegemony is a general theory of modern political power, in the sense that capitalist modernity created a new form of class power that was no longer chiefly rooted in domination – openly authoritarian class rule, whereby the ruled are the passive and external object of state power. Domination describes the relation between the dominant class and subaltern (=subordinate) groups that do *not* accept its leadership.⁴ Conversely, hegemony defines the asymmetrical alliance between the ruling class and elite and subaltern groups that actively accept its political, social, cultural and/or economic leadership and prestige. At its core, hegemony is class leadership, consisting of the articulation of a systemic worldview, of the formation of intellectuals organic to the class from which they emerge and of the ‘seduction’ of intellectuals from other social groups to the hegemonic project.

Returning to Marx’s idea of the ‘universal class’ in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*,⁵ Gramsci appreciates the universal inclusivism of bourgeois hegemony:

The 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. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an ‘educator’.⁶

This ‘organic passage’ from society to the bourgeois class was formally realised in the political community – ‘the state’ in its narrow sense – in which every citizen is equal before the law; and in the civil community, where ‘[t]hose social elements which were most highly endowed with energy and spirit of enterprise rose from the lower classes to the ruling classes’.⁷ Political citizenship and the opportunity for individual social and economic promotion to the ranks of the bourgeoisie were the mechanisms of this organic passage. Whereas the dominant classes of the Ancien Régime ruled society almost ‘from the outside’, the bourgeoisie ruled by *absorbing* and *becoming* society and *reshaping* it in its own image.⁸

Gramsci understood the promise of an ‘organic passage’ in terms of modernity’s mobilising *myth*, a concept he appropriated from revolutionary syndicalist Georges Sorel (1847–1922). A political myth is ‘a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorizing, but rather as a creation of concrete fantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will’.⁹ Criticising Sorel’s ‘spontaneist’ conception of hegemony, Gramsci argued that this myth had to be actively organised

³ Ibid, pp. 24–5.

⁴ SPN 57; Q1\$44.

⁵ Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction’, in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 243–57.

⁶ SPN 260; Q8\$2.

⁷ SPN 80f49; cf. Q5\$48.

⁸ Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 143.

⁹ SPN 126; Q8\$21.

and maintained.¹⁰ Hegemony does not emerge through contingent ideas or sentiments: in order to become a *structured* worldview and an *enduring* passion, a political myth has to be embodied by a hegemonic apparatus: ‘the material organisation meant to preserve, defend, and develop the theoretical or ideological “front”’.¹¹ More specifically: ‘the wide-ranging series of articulated institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices – from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties – by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power’.¹²

Although Gramsci recognises that modern society is saturated by hegemony in all its pores, he doesn’t advance a decentralised conception of power. Hegemony is concentrated in the hegemonic apparatus of the *party*. However, Gramsci defines a party not as a clearly delineated, electoral organisation, but as the political organisation of a class and as such ‘an embryonic State structure’.¹³ Formally different parties may represent the same class, or a single party can contain multiple class projects. Drawing on Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469–1527) concept of *Il Principe* (The Prince), which articulated a modern notion of politics through the ideal type of the individual political ruler, Gramsci likened the modern party to a ‘modern prince’: ‘an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form’.¹⁴

The universalist and inclusionary claims of modern politics do not exclude force and violence. Gramsci turns to Machiavelli’s figure of the *centaur* to explain ‘the “dual perspective” in political action and in the life of the state... force and consent, domination and hegemony, violence and civility... agitation and propaganda, tactics and strategy’.¹⁵ Machiavelli posits that:

there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man. This has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline; which means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable.¹⁶

As a student of Chiron, the bourgeois Prince has to rely on a combination of force (violence and coercion), fraud, corruption and consent-generating policies.¹⁷ The difference between bourgeois domination and hegemony is not the quantitative *proportion* between coercion and consent, but the degree to which force is successfully *grounded* in popular

¹⁰ SPN 128–9; Q13§1.

¹¹ FS 155–6; Q3§49.

¹² Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p. 226.

¹³ Q3§42; SPN 226.

¹⁴ Q13§1; SPN 129.

¹⁵ Q8§86; SPN 169–170.

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince Revised*, Translated by W.K. Marriott, Edited by Anthony Uyl (Ingersoll: Devoted Publishing, 2019), XVIII§1, 54.

¹⁷ Q1§48.

consent.¹⁸ The hegemonic rule of the dominant class can very well rely on a disproportionate use of force (war, occupation, state violence), as long as this is accepted by its allies.

For Gramsci, the ideal type of revolutionary bourgeois hegemony is historically represented by the Jacobin leadership during the French Revolution. Through his study of the *Risorgimento* (the process of Italian unification and state formation), the failed revolutions of 1848 and the rise of Fascism, Gramsci concluded that, ultimately, bourgeois hegemony was a failed project. The Jacobin revolutionary leadership was replaced by a process of *passive revolution*.¹⁹ In *Gramsci on Tahrir* I have discussed in detail how Gramsci developed the notion of passive revolution as a criterion to interpret the *failure* of bourgeois hegemony.²⁰ The concept draws our attention to the agency and capacity of dominant groups to maintain power, even in times of crisis, by a diverse ‘repertoire of reaction’: revolutions ‘from above’; reformism and gradual social transformations; state intervention and expansion; Bonapartism/Caesarism; *trasformismo* (‘transformism’; i.e. the cooptation of subaltern groups and their intellectuals); and the displacement and fragmentation of revolutionary movements from below.

For Gramsci, the notion of hegemony was simply ‘the present form of the ...doctrine of permanent revolution’.²¹ In his March 1850 *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, Marx had posited that although the German proletariat should support the democratic petty bourgeoisie in its fight against Prussian absolutism, its revolution had to be made ‘permanent’: when the radical petty bourgeoisie had attained its democratic reforms, the working class should continue its own struggle until it conquered (and dismantled) state power.²² The Marxian notion of permanent revolution expressed the always-present strategic possibility of social or human emancipation, whereby the struggle of the proletariat would organise a real organic passage of society, thereby abolishing capitalism, the state and class society. Hence *proletarian* hegemony was not merely the working class replacing the bourgeoisie as a ruling class, it also constituted the birth of a new politics – a new politics that was already being developed *before* the conquest of state power. Whereas bourgeois hegemony tries to preserve the distance between the leaders and the led, proletarian hegemony attempts to overcome this distance.²³ Referring to Marx’s third thesis on Feuerbach that ‘it is essential to educate the educator himself’,²⁴ Gramsci stressed the need for a ‘dialectical pedagogy’ between leaders and led. The proletarian Prince should not only be a political organ, but ‘a coalition of the rebel-

¹⁸ Cf. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, pp. 162–5.

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*.

²⁰ Brecht De Smet, *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); cf. Brecht De Smet, ‘Rejoinder: Tahrir in Gramsci’, *Review of African Political Economy* 45 no. 155 (2018): 135–45.

²¹ Q13§7; SPN 56n5; cf. SPN 242. Cf. Peter Thomas, ‘Uneven Developments, Combined: The First World War and Marxist Theories of Revolutions’, in *Cataclysm 1914: The First World War and the Making of Modern World Politics*, ed. Alexander Anievas (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 297.

²² Karl Marx, ‘The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850’, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 10 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), pp. 127, 281.

²³ Q15§4; SPN 144.

²⁴ Marx, ‘Concerning Feuerbach’, in *Early Writings*, p. 422.

lions subalterns, engaged in acts of self-liberation of hegemonic politics – a pedagogical laboratory for unlearning the habits of subalternity and discovering new forms of conviviality, mutuality and collective self-determination'.²⁵ This idea of contentious politics as a political and social 'laboratory' has more recently been articulated by the proponents of prefigurative politics.

Prince or Prefiguration?

Surprisingly, there has been an extensive debate among Middle East scholars whether the mass mobilisations of 2011 constituted a revolution at all. I have argued elsewhere against a *consequentialist* conceptualisation of revolution, which defines a process on the basis of its outcomes.²⁶ The consequentialist approach was famously articulated by Theda Skocpol in *States and Social Revolutions*, who underlined that: 'successful sociopolitical transformation – actual change of state and class structures – [are] part of the specification of what is to be called a social revolution'.²⁷ Actions that lead up to structural changes are understood from the standpoint of the end result. For example, emphasising that Egypt's political and economic system had not been transformed in any substantial way after the fall of Mubarak, labour historian Joel Beinin posited that: 'The January 25 Revolution is not over. Rather, it has not yet occurred'.²⁸

Such a consequentialist approach is problematic because, by eliding the defining factor of revolutionary agency and prefiguration, it cannot account for *failed* revolutions and successful *counter-revolutions*. The revolutionary process that happens *before* structural changes involves the intentions²⁹ and efforts³⁰ of collective actors to establish a new political and social order. The Arab uprisings and the Egyptian 25 January 2011 insurrection in particular illustrate that revolutions are already taking place before the appropriation of state power and institutional change.³¹ In Egypt, the 2011 uprising was a decisive episode within a longer revolutionary process. The early 2000s saw the emergence of street politics: demonstrations in solidarity with the Second Palestinian Intifada; mass protests against the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon; and the civil-democratic movement of *Kefaya* ('Enough'). Workers went on strike and established independent trade unions to improve wages and working conditions. Farmers protested against increasing rents and land grabbing, occupying their plots and creating cooperatives. The 25 January insurrection rendered explicit a revolutionary process that was

²⁵ Thomas, 'Hegemony, passive revolution and the modern Prince', pp. 32–3.

²⁶ Cf. De Smet, *Gramsci on Tahrir*.

²⁷ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

²⁸ Joel Beinin, 'Was There a January 25 Revolution?' *Jadaliyya*, 25 January 2013. Available at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9766/was-there-a-january-25-revolution> (accessed 25 February 2020).

²⁹ Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), p. 16.

³⁰ Jack Goldstone, 'Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 142.

³¹ Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions 1492–1992* (London: Wiley, 1996).

already building up in the decade before 2011.³²

Studying revolutions means taking into account the formation of collective subjects and their prefigurations of alternative societies. From 2011 onward the popular uprisings in Tunisia and in Egypt stimulated and transformed regional and global grassroots politics. In the West, existing networks of alterglobalisation activists and new movements such as the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street were inspired by the occupation of Midan Tahrir, which not only presented a *strategic* example of how a dictator could be defeated, but also an *imaginary* of a new society in the ‘here and now’.

Such ‘imagining practices’ have been called instances of prefiguration or prefigurative politics, especially by anarchist authors such as Uri Gordon, David Graeber, Benjamin Franks, Marianne Maeckelbergh and Mathijs van de Sande; and ‘autonomist’ Marxists such as John Holloway, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. The term prefiguration was first used by the council communist Carl Boggs to refer to ‘the prefigurative tradition, which begins with the nineteenth century anarchists and includes the syndicalists, council communists and the New Left’.³³ Boggs defined ‘prefigurative’ as ‘the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal’.³⁴ Reiterating Marx’s adage that the emancipation of the working class had to be the work of the working class itself, Boggs stressed that Communist politics should not only be focused on ameliorating the living conditions of workers, or even the strategic conquest of state power, but on the creation of organs of self-governance through the struggle. Boggs’ opposition between the strategic and the prefigurative dimension of popular struggle was further developed by Wini Breines, who asserted that: ‘Every genuinely radical social movement must come to grips with the conflict between grassroots self-activity and participation on the one hand, and organisational maintenance, efficiency and strategy on the other’.³⁵ Breines studied the civil rights, students and new social movements of the 1950s–1970s, especially the case of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), highlighting their spontaneous, decentralised and participatory character. Breines put the relation between means and ends at the centre of the opposition between strategic and prefigurative politics, claiming that ‘the new left *chose not to be strategic*; it chose to fail according to traditional political standards and definitions... The process, the means, the participation and the dialogue were as important as the goal’.³⁶

³² Sami Zemni, Brecht De Smet and Koenraad Bogaert, ‘Luxemburg on Tahrir Square: Reading the Arab Revolutions with Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike*’, *Antipode* 45 no. 4 (2013): 888–907; Maha Abdelrahman, *Egypt’s Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

³³ Carl Boggs, ‘Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control’, *Radical America* 11 no. 6 (1977): 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Wini Breines, ‘Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels’ “Iron Law”’, *Social Problems* 27 no. 4 (1980): 427.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

Today ‘prefiguration’ presents itself as an elastic term embodying a diversity of imprecise and even contradictory meanings. Authors have described the substance of prefiguration as ‘a *vision* of the sort of society you want to have in miniature.’³⁷ However, it is unclear how such an *imagination* of an alternative society is materially grounded in the present order of things. Thus prefiguration as ‘a *foretaste* of what truly democratic society might be like’³⁸ indicates that the future is not only imagined and foreshadowed, but also savoured in the present. Prefiguration signifies that people are able to experience the new society *before* it is actualised. Even more specific is its definition as ‘an *enactment* of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society.’³⁹ The substance of prefiguration then appears as a certain type of activity: ‘prefiguration is something people do.’⁴⁰

The notion of prefigurative *politics* or *strategy* implies that this performance is not only a simulacrum of an alternative society, but somehow constitutive of it. The content of this activity has been interpreted as ‘a *nucleus of a future socialist state* [creating] an entirely new kind of politics, breaking down the division of labour between everyday life and political activity’;⁴¹ an *instrument* ‘to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution)’;⁴² ‘*modes of organisation* that consciously resemble the world you want to create’;⁴³ the *process* that ‘ensures that the movement would be ready with alternative governing structures that have been tried and tested’;⁴⁴ and ‘*forms of open-ended subject making* that are embedded in and constitutive of collective struggle’.⁴⁵

These views highlight different shades of the mediating role of prefigurative activity in the creation of a new society. They share an understanding that prefigurative *activity* encompasses the generation of new social forms: prefigurative *structures*. The relation of these structures to the future alternative society is unclear, however. Do they represent cell-forms from which a more complex and complete society is to be developed, or is it already that society but in miniature form? In the first case, prefigurative structures require a qualitative development; in the second merely a quantitative (spatial) expansion. There is an important difference between, on the one hand, ‘*bridging* the temporal distinction’ between the actual and the potential, between the ‘here and now’ and ‘a future alternative

³⁷ David Graeber in Mathijs van de Sande, ‘Fighting with Tools: Prefiguration and Radical Politics in the Twenty-First Century’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 27 no. 2 (2015): 178, my emphasis.

³⁸ David Graeber in Marianne Maeckelbergh, ‘The Road to Democracy: The Political Legacy of “1968”’, *IRSH* 56 (2011): 314, my emphasis.

³⁹ Maeckelbergh, ‘The Road to Democracy’, p. 302.

⁴⁰ Marianne Maeckelbergh, ‘Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement’, *Social Movement Studies* 10 no. 1 (2011): 3.

⁴¹ Boggs, ‘Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control’, p. 104, my emphasis.

⁴² Breines, ‘Community and Organization’, p. 421.

⁴³ Andrej Grubacic and David Graeber, ‘Anarchism, Or the Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-first Century’, *ZNet* (6 January 2004), p. 5, my emphasis.

⁴⁴ Maeckelbergh, ‘Doing is Believing’, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik, ‘Direct Democracy and a politics of becoming’, *American Ethnologist* 39 no. 2 (2012): 241.

society;⁴⁶ and, on the other, altogether ‘*removing* the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present toward a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present’.⁴⁷ In the first instance there is a transition process or an entanglement between the present and the future, in which the present takes on some forms of the future but not immediately *becomes* it. This perspective is congruent with a ‘genetic’ or developmentalist view of prefiguration as the cell-form or seed of an alternative society. This is also the view I endorse based on the experience of the Egyptian revolution, as I explain further in the text. Conversely, the latter example posits a complete *identity* between ‘the real’ and ‘the ideal’: the future society is immediately actualised through prefigurative activity.

Prefigurative thought challenges the notion of a predetermined, goal-driven political process. Sometimes a more or less dialectical concept of means and ends is put forward: ‘the means aim to reflect and comply with the longer-term political goals.’⁴⁸ This perspective recognises means and ends as separate yet homologous parts of the same process. On other occasions the critique of means and ends takes on the more extreme form of ‘a practice in which there is no clear qualitative difference between means and ends: both are, so to speak, mirrored in the practice concerned.’⁴⁹ Maeckelbergh rejects the use of ‘strategy’ to refer to the pursuit of a singular and predetermined goal, instead, she advances the idea that prefigurative politics is a strategic and organisational process in itself.⁵⁰ Means and ends are posited as two categories that stand in a relation of opposition – an opposition which is solved conceptually by making means and ends identical and practically by absorbing ends into means. From this perspective, direct action, a ‘physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative,’⁵¹ appears as the smallest generative unit, the cell-form of prefigurative politics, or the tactics of an overall prefigurative strategy.⁵²

Sometimes prefigurative activity is conceived of as a dual strategy of confronting existing political structures while simultaneously building alternative ones: ‘Confrontation opens up the space necessary for experiments in horizontal democracy and it safeguards these spaces from cooptation’.⁵³ However, prefigurative activity is also understood ‘as a *process* in which one tries to *escape* from dominant relations of repression and exploitation... The creation of alternative practices and structures is not primarily focused on the abolition of the state but instead on the ongoing reconfiguration of relations of property, production, and communication outside of the state.’⁵⁴ Hence the occupation of Tahrir and the many international square-occupation movements in its wake appeared as the historical vindication of the traditions and principles that had been developing among alterglobalisation

⁴⁶ Van de Sande, ‘The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square’, *passim*, my emphasis.

⁴⁷ Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy* (London: Pluto, 2009), p. 67, my emphasis.

⁴⁸ Mathijs van de Sande, ‘Fighting with Tools: Prefiguration and Radical Politics in the Twenty-First Century’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 27 no. 2 (2015): 189.

⁴⁹ Van de Sande, ‘The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square’, p. 232.

⁵⁰ Maeckelbergh, ‘Doing is Believing’, pp. 4–6.

⁵¹ David Graeber, ‘The New Anarchists’, *New Left Review* 13 (January–February 2002): 3.

⁵² Maeckelbergh, ‘The Road to Democracy’, p. 329.

⁵³ Maeckelbergh, ‘Doing is Believing’, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Van de Sande, ‘Fighting with Tools’, p. 183.

activists. Prefigurative politics represented a qualitatively new way of doing politics that went beyond the discredited strategies and methods of both social-democratic reformism and revolutionary Marxism.

The Prince of Tahrir

Mathijs van de Sande conceived of the occupation of Midan Tahrir as a prime example of prefiguration: ‘a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the “here and now”, rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future’.⁵⁵ Elements of prefigurative politics were already present in the tangle of political and social movements that had prepared the groundwork for the 25 January uprising. For example, workers, farmers and political activists were already experimenting with new forms of organising and democratic decision-making, and new types of solidarity between subaltern groups were emerging.⁵⁶ Such molecular politics of prefiguration remained limited in their practical and geographical scope, but they acquired a qualitatively new dynamic when the masses entered the streets during the 18-day uprising in 2011.

The 25 January uprising started as a series of demonstrations, directing moderate demands towards those in power. Despite the importance of protests happening in Alexandria, in provincial cities such as Mahalla and Suez and in the countryside, the centre of gravity of the insurrection was undeniably Tahrir Square, which ‘became the epicentre of a revolution. Protesters not only transformed it, they were themselves transformed by their presence in it. Tahrir became a revolutionary organism unto itself.’⁵⁷ Tahrir was able to play this role because of its location in the geographical and political heart of Cairo. It was ‘a major transport hub surrounded by vital elements of the state apparatus: the parliament, several ministerial buildings, and the imposing Mogamma.’⁵⁸ Furthermore, the occupation was rooted in a history of popular contention: ‘Liberation Square’ referred to the 1919 revolutionary uprising against British colonialism. In 2003 Tahrir had already been occupied for ten hours in protest against the war in Iraq.⁵⁹ Hence when street fights broke out between protesters and the Central Security Forces (CSF), it was a logical step to occupy and hold Tahrir to make a stand against the riot police. The occupation of Tahrir was merely a means to protect the demonstration against police brutality. On Friday 28 January traditional social meetings after the Friday midday prayers organically transformed into political mass demonstrations. Demonstrations turned into huge street fights with the police. The revolutionaries conquered social spaces that were formerly controlled by the state. Occupation was no longer a means to *protest* against the state, for

⁵⁵ Van de Sande, ‘The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square’, p. 230.

⁵⁶ Cf. Abdelrahman, *Egypt’s Long Revolution*; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*; Beinun, *Workers and Thieves*; Brecht De Smet, *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt: Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁵⁷ Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), p. 5.

⁵⁸ Muhammad A. Rashed, ‘The Egyptian Revolution: A Participant’s Account from Tahrir Square, January and February 2011’, *Anthropology Today* 27 no. 2 (2011): 23.

⁵⁹ Khalil, *Liberation Square*, p. 39.

it *expelled* the state, creating the space for structures to develop organically from below. Occupation became a goal in itself.

The ‘freed zone’ was increasingly dubbed the ‘Republic of Tahrir’ by participants and observers.⁶⁰ The spontaneous (i.e. not planned in advance) character of the mass movement did not prevent it from organising itself: committees defended, cleaned, entertained and governed Tahrir. If anything, Tahrir represented ‘spontaneous order out of chaos’.⁶¹ In order to maintain the occupation tents, blankets, food and water had to be provided. The 18 days of occupation transformed Midan Tahrir into a ‘city of tents’ where injured protesters were treated, clothes were washed, toilets and stations for charging mobile phones were installed, nurseries were set up and so on.⁶² Football ‘ultras’ offered their ‘skills in banner writing, chanting, and the use of fireworks’.⁶³ Famous artists and actors joined the occupiers, but there were also amateur cartoonists, musicians and singers who emerged from the self-organising activity of Tahrir.⁶⁴ Stages were erected where anyone could speak, sing, act, recite or play music.⁶⁵ In short: the occupation of Tahrir created the freedom to enjoy art, love and life in new ways.⁶⁶

A revolution is of course not only a ‘festival of the oppressed and exploited’,⁶⁷ but also a *confrontation* with the state, which has to be *defeated* in order for the prefigured practices to continue to exist and thrive. Dual power – a situation in which a new political power centre is emerging while the old still exists⁶⁸ – is the logical outcome of mass, revolutionary prefiguration. Besieged by the state the square needed *directive* organs and practices of deliberation and decision-making. Leaders consisted of both experienced activists and capable men and women who emerged within the ranks of protesters. Political activists distributed leaflets with practical tips and tricks for demonstrators, for example what to do when being attacked by tear gas. The occupiers learned to use the ‘bestial’ side of centauresque power. State repression and attacks by civilian Mubarak supporters – especially during the infamous ‘Battle of the Camel’ on Wednesday 2 February – changed the square

⁶⁰ Cf. Khalil, *Liberation Square*.

⁶¹ Mohammed Bamyeh, ‘The Egyptian Revolution: First Impressions from the Field [Updated]’, *Jadaliyya*, 11 February 2011. Available at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/561/the-egyptian-revolution_first-impressions-from-the (accessed 25 February 2020); Samuli Schielke, ‘“You’ll Be Late for the Revolution!” An Anthropologist’s Diary of the Egyptian Revolution’, *Jadaliyya*, 8 February 2011. Available at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/580/youll-be-late-for-the-revolution-an-anthropologist (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁶² Sahar Keraitim and Samia Mehrez, ‘Mulid al-Tahrir: Semiotics of a Revolution’, in *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, ed. Samia Mehrez (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), p. 28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Sinan Antoon, ‘Singing for the Revolution’, *Jadaliyya*, 31 January 2011. Available at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/508/singing-for-the-revolution (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁶⁵ De Smet, *A Revolutionary Pedagogy of Revolt*.

⁶⁶ Cf. Rashed, ‘The Egyptian Revolution’.

⁶⁷ Vladimir I.U. Lenin, ‘Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution’, *Lenin: Collected Works Volume 9* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), pp. 15–140.

⁶⁸ Cf. Vladimir I.U. Lenin, ‘The Dual Power’, *Lenin: Collected Works Volume 24* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 38–41.

from a 'utopian street party' into 'Fortress Tahrir'.⁶⁹

The Republic of Tahrir functioned as Gramsci's modern myth, as a 'concrete fantasy'. From the activities of protesting and occupying emerged prefigurative structures that in turn organised these mobilisations as a political subject. Moreover, this subject was based on a broad coalition of subaltern groups, which constructed their collective will through an inclusive and democratic social laboratory and a dialectical pedagogy between leaders and masses. Hence Tahrir serves as a concrete example of Gramsci's Modern Prince: an emancipatory practice transcending modern (party) politics.

Yet Tahrir also dramatically illustrated that prefigurative politics is a necessary, but insufficient condition for the creation of hegemony. The Egyptian uprising broke down the state as 'the unity of the ruling classes',⁷⁰ rendering it disorganised, but not defeated. The CSF was replaced by military troops who did not confront the protesters head-on, but who preferred a literal war of position, digging 'urban trenches' around important state sites, such as parliament, the Maspero Radio and Television building, the presidential palace and the stock exchange.⁷¹ The Tahrir occupiers organised their own structures of self-governance, but these embryonic instances of dual power did not dismantle the existing state structures. If the 25 January uprising represented a nationwide 'war of movement', in Gramsci's terminology, then Tahrir was the eye of the storm, a 'war of position' where protesters were loath to confront the military, digging their own trenches for a war of attrition with the regime, hoping Mubarak would leave of his own accord, like Ben Ali did in Tunisia.

The Military Minotaur

Paraphrasing Gramsci, one cannot study the historical movement of the subordinate classes in separation from the movement of the ruling classes – one cannot understand revolution without counter-revolution.⁷² Counter-revolutionary movements not only react upon revolutionaries' conquest of power, but they attempt to prevent revolutionary actors from gaining power.⁷³ Reaction already occurs simultaneously with *or even before* the revolutionary action it reacts upon. During the 18 days of the uprising, the regime tried to defeat the country-wide protests by using every element in its tactical 'repertoire of reaction': deploying the CSF on a massive scale, using water cannons and shooting rubber bullets and teargas canisters; spreading propaganda through government-controlled media; mobilising loyal supporters – the so-called *baltageyya* (thugs) – in violent attacks on peaceful demonstrators; disrupting internet and mobile phone communications; organising a capital strike; ordering curfews; sowing chaos by releasing prisoners and sending traffic and neighbourhood police to the barracks; offering political and economic concessions in exchange for an end to the protests; wooing and intimidating opposition

⁶⁹ Khalil, *Liberation Square*, pp. 243, 247.

⁷⁰ Cf. Q8§182; SPN 366.

⁷¹ Cf. Khalil, *Liberation Square*, p. 208.

⁷² Q13§29; SPN 202.

⁷³ Nick Bisley, 'Counter-revolution, Order and International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 3 no. 1 (2004): 49–69.

leaders; and brutal assassinations of protesters by rooftop snipers.⁷⁴ Finally, when the CSF and police were defeated the army was called into the streets to restore order.

The experience of the Egyptian revolution asserts that ‘the regime’ is not a passive and homogeneous obstacle that has to be overcome, but that the concept covers a ‘varied range of dominant elites [acting] against a credible threat to overturn them from below.’⁷⁵ This alliance does not only consist of ‘Egyptian’ forces, but also contains regional, international and transnational actors, such as Saudi capital; US geopolitical interests; and the IMF. It represents a political economy that is structured by enduring (neo)colonial and peripheral development, rentierism, neoliberal reform, financialisation and geopolitical coalitions.⁷⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail about the international and transnational dimension of revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt.⁷⁷

After the defeat of the CSF, the entrance of tanks in the streets signalled a power shift from the Mubarak clique and the Ministry of Interior to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF),⁷⁸ consisting of the Defence Minister, the Chief of Staff and other high-ranked officers. For the military elites, the uprising represented both a threat to the status quo and an opportunity to improve their position within the ruling stratum.⁷⁹ When protesters burned down headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party in Cairo, soldiers did not intervene.⁸⁰ This created confusion among the protesters about the political character of the military apparatus. When tanks and APCs moved into the centre of Alexandria, Cairo and Suez, they were often welcomed by demonstrators who hoped that the army would join forces with them.⁸¹ The imaginary of the military as a revolutionary, popular actor was still rooted in the Nasserist experience of the 1950s and 1960s.⁸²

The misapprehension of the counter-revolutionary role of the armed forces among many protesters and the absence of an alternative leadership ‘from below’ allowed the generals to sidestep the emerging situation of dual power and present themselves as caretakers of the revolutionary process. The SCAF could not establish an open military dictatorship: directly after the uprising, any move toward military rule would reignite the revolutionary

⁷⁴ Khalil, *Liberation Square*; Rashed, ‘The Egyptian Revolution’; Joshua Stacher, ‘Egypt’s Democratic Mirage’, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 February 2011. Available at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67351/joshua-stacher/egypts-democratic-mirage?page=2 (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁷⁵ Dan Slater and Nicholas R. Smith, ‘The Power of Counterrevolution: Elitist Origins of Political Order in Postcolonial Asia and Africa’, *American Journal of Sociology* 121 no. 5 (2016): 1472.

⁷⁶ Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

⁷⁷ Cf. Jamie Allinson, ‘Counter-Revolution as International Phenomenon: The Case of Egypt’, *Review of International Studies* 45 no. 2 (2019): 320–44.

⁷⁸ Kandil, *Liberation Square*, p. 227.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Paul Amar, ‘Why Mubarak Is Out’ in *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?*, eds Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, and Ziad Abu-Rish (London: Pluto Press: 2012), pp. 83–90.

⁸¹ Walter Armbrust, ‘The Revolution against Neoliberalism’ in *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings*, eds Haddad, Bsheer and Abu-Rish, pp. 113–23.

⁸² Brecht De Smet, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt’, *Science & Society* 78 no. 1 (2014): 11–40; Sara Salem, ‘Critical Interventions in Debates on the Arab Revolutions: Centring Class’, *Review of African Political Economy* 45 no. 155 (2018): 125–34.

process. The best option for the survival of the Egyptian ruling classes was that the military placed itself at the head of the revolution and *lead* it in order to *defeat* it. Moreover, the armed forces were pressured by their Western allies into developing a civil façade.⁸³

Using Gramsci's criterion of passive revolution, the 'soft' military coup that ended the 18 days did not initiate a period of 'democratic transition', which would eventually fail and end in 2013 with the fall of Egypt's first civilian president Muhammad Morsi. Instead, I argue against much of the literature that it heralded a period of *counter-revolution in democratic form*.⁸⁴ The military wanted to re-establish state power, but gradually, without provoking another uprising. The top-down process of 'democratisation' was based on military-supervised elections, plebiscites and constitution-making, which were deployed as weapons of restoration and state rebuilding. Forms of popular, direct democracy that were still being molecularly prefigured within the enduring demonstrations, occupations and workplace protests were excluded from the military-led process of democratisation, which emphasised procedure and representation within the narrow sphere of the state. This severed the connection between political and social struggles and thus between liberal-oriented middle classes, industrial workers, peasants and the urban poor. Strikes and social protests were reprimanded for being *fi'awi* (factional) and opposed to the national good.⁸⁵

As the reverberating revolutionary myth could not simply be demolished it was hollowed out from within. Nationalism had been an integral part of the 2011 uprising, but at the time it was a grassroots and inclusive national-popular sentiment that pitted *al-sha'b* (the people) against *al-nizam* (the system). 'The people' included Copts and Muslims, lower and middle classes, men and women, young and old people. While this revolutionary nationalism foregrounded an Egyptian instead of an Arab or Muslim identity, it considered itself politically as a part of a regional uprising. The 'counter-revolution in democratic form' went hand in hand with a discursive struggle waged by regime parties, state media and corporate interests to shift nationalism's popular, political, regional content to a culturally essentialist, exclusivist and authoritarian interpretation of what it was to be 'Egyptian'.⁸⁶ The discursive opposition between 'revolutionary' and 'counter-revolutionary' was displaced by the binary of 'Egyptian' versus 'un-Egyptian' rioters and foreign spies.

Elections and referenda fragmented and redirected the organised, collective will that had been built on Tahrir and in the streets and workplaces. The qualitative majority of the streets was submerged in the quantitative majority of the polling booths, which was dominated by the conservative majority of the 'couch party': layers of the population that had stayed at home and had not (yet) participated in the democratic experiment of Tahrir, the strikes or the popular committees. Moreover, by controlling the pace and agenda of elections and referenda, the SCAF was able to create cleavages within the broad revolutionary

⁸³ Achcar, *The People Want*, p. 236.

⁸⁴ Cf. De Smet, 'Rejoinder: Tahrir in Gramsci'.

⁸⁵ Hesham Sallam, 'Striking Back at Egyptian Workers', *Middle East Research and Information Project* 259 (Summer 2011).

⁸⁶ Hoda Elsadda in Sherene Seikaly, Laila Shereen Sakr, Hoda Elsadda, Pascale Ghazaleh, and Lina Attalah, 'Who are "the people"?' *Mada Masr*, 11 February 2015. Available at <https://madasr.com/en/2015/02/11/feature/politics/who-are-the-people/> (accessed 25 February 2020).

alliance. The constitutional referendum on 19 March 2011 divided the revolutionary movement into ‘secularists’ against ‘Islamists’. In the next two years revolutionary groups and parties remained unsuccessful in establishing a revolutionary ‘third current’ in between the military and the Islamist camp, which consisted mainly of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist parties. The failure of the revolutionary camp to organise itself led to the foregrounding of the conflict between the regime and the Islamist wing of the counter-revolution. In Egypt this failure was reflected in the presidential elections of 2012, which cleared the way for Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s coup in 2013.

The Labyrinth of Counter-Revolution

The deposal of President Muhammad Morsi in 2013 has been framed by scholars and activists as a missed opportunity for democratic transition.⁸⁷ Witnessing the massacre of Brotherhood sympathisers at Rabea al-Adawiya Square and the return to a *de facto* military dictatorship under Sisi in 2013, it is understandable that Morsi’s presidency evokes the feeling of a missed chance to ‘democratise’ Egypt. Yet this nostalgia masks the labyrinthine counter-revolutionary character of this period.⁸⁸ In February 2011 the Ikhwan (Brotherhood) leadership supported the military ‘soft coup’ and called upon protesters to leave Tahrir Square and start negotiations with the SCAF. This continued the Brotherhood’s position of ‘loyal opposition’ to the regime of the Mubarak era. The movement presented itself as a power broker between the generals and the popular masses,⁸⁹ desiring political recognition and the addition of its own businessmen such as Khayrat al-Shater to the ruling stratum.⁹⁰ The Brotherhood began to obstruct demonstrations and strikes, proving its value as a counter-revolutionary force to domestic (especially military) and foreign (especially US) elites.⁹¹ In return for the Brotherhood’s ‘loyal opposition’ the SCAF released Ikhwan activists from prison and recognised the movement’s political apparatus: the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Scheduling early elections was also to the advantage of the Brotherhood as it was the most organised opposition force.⁹²

However, the alliance between the SCAF and the Brotherhood was instable and characterised by distrust and competition. The Muslim Brothers’ landslide in the parliamentary elections of 2011 encouraged them to nominate their leader Khayrat al-Shater as a candidate for the presidential elections of 2012. As the SCAF prohibited al-Shater from running for office, the Ikhwan fielded Muhammad Morsi instead. In the first round of the elec-

⁸⁷ E.g. Carrie R. Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁸⁸ E.g. Anne Alexander and Sameh Naguib, ‘Behind every Caesar a new one? Reflections on revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt in response to Gramsci on Tahrir,’ *Review of African Political Economy* 45 no. 155 (2018): 91–103.

⁸⁹ Anne Alexander, ‘Brothers-in-Arms? The Egyptian Military, the Ikhwan and the Revolutions of 1952 and 2011,’ *Journal of North African Studies* 16 no. 4 (2011): 536.

⁹⁰ Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio, ‘After Mubarak, before Transition: The Challenges for Egypt’s Democratic Opposition (interview and event analysis),’ *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 4 no. 1 (2012): 102–12.

⁹¹ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 170–1.

⁹² Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, pp. 170–2.

tions, the ‘revolutionary’ candidates Hamdeen Sabahi and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh were beaten by a slim margin into third and fourth place respectively by Morsi and regime-aligned candidate Ahmed Shafiq. In the second round, Egyptians were forced to choose between Morsi and Shafiq. Morsi’s slim victory over Shafiq not only revealed a deep political divide, but it actively forced a choice upon the revolutionary will between two wings of the counter-revolution: secular, military dictatorship or civil Islamism, both rooted in a neoliberal social and economic project.

Morsi’s presidency represented a more confident ‘counter-revolution in democratic form’.⁹³ Similar to the Tunisian Islamists he tried to develop a hegemonic project based on the notion of *al-Nahda* (Renaissance), translating the radical demands of the 25 January uprising – bread, freedom and social justice – into moderate slogans of prosperity, dignity and stability. He deflected popular initiative by presenting himself as the chief defender of popular revolutionary demands, while seeking at the same time a pragmatic compromise with junior leaders of the Armed Forces. Morsi’s constitutional declaration of 12 August 2012 retired the old generation of SCAF generals such as Hussein Tantawi and Sami Anan. The new President raised junior officer Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the position of Defence Minister and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces.⁹⁴ The constitution of 26 December 2012 shielded the defence budget from parliamentary oversight and maintained that the Minister of Defence was to be chosen from the ranks of the military.

The transformation of the *form of government* from a more or less outright military dictatorship to a presidential democracy veiled the fact that the so-called ‘deep state’ – the elite networks, bureaucratic centres of decision-making and authoritarian structures such as the military and the Ministry of Interior – remained intact. Instead of destroying the structures of dictatorship the Brotherhood tried to capture positions in the cabinet, ministries, state unions and professional associations. Morsi cooperated with businessmen from the Mubarak era, continuing neoliberal reforms that aggravated enduring problems of unemployment, purchasing power and unfair taxation.⁹⁵ Morsi also accepted a new IMF loan, the implementation of which was stalled in the face of popular protests.⁹⁶ Labour protests faced state repression. Facing competition from the influential Salafist parties, in order to become hegemonic within the Sunni Islamist camp, Morsi remained largely silent on sectarian attacks against Shi’a and Coptic minorities.

Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and passive revolution help us to understand the Morsi episode as essentially counter-revolutionary, as it continued to block the development of prefigurative structures from below, displacing popular initiative with state agency from above. The Brotherhood’s preservation of the deep state prepared the way for the triumph

⁹³ Cf. Roberto Roccu, ‘Again on the Revolutionary Subject: Problematizing Class and Subalternity in Gramsci on Tahrir’, *Review of African Political Economy* 45 no. 155: 104–14, pace Alexander and Naguib, ‘Brothers-in-Arms?’.

⁹⁴ Robert Springborg, ‘The View from the Officers’ Club’, *Egypt Independent*, 29 November 2012. Available at www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/view-officers-club (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁹⁵ Wael Gamal, ‘The Brotherhood’s One Percent’, *Jadaliyya*, 18 July 2012. Available at <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26638> (accessed 25 February 2020); Maria C. Paciello, ‘Delivering the Revolution? Post-Uprising Socio-Economics in Tunisia and Egypt’, *International Spectator* 48 no. 4 (2013): 8–15.

⁹⁶ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 170.

of the counter-revolution from 2013 onward.

In the autumn of 2012, popular discontent resurfaced because of the Brotherhood's inability and unwillingness to democratise the deep state and to solve the economic crisis. Facing increasing subaltern and elite opposition, Morsi's constitutional declaration on 22 November 2012 temporarily granted him absolute executive and legislative powers. This move appeared to confirm the worst fears among secular opposition forces about a 'Brotherhoodisation' of state and society. The opposition against the presidency crystallised in the National Salvation Front (NSF), which united right-wing opposition figures such as Amr Moussa, liberal-democrats such as Muhammed al-Baradei, Nasserists such as Hamdeen Sabahi, leftist trade union leaders such as Kamal Abu Eita, and former Mubarakists against the Brotherhood. The presence of *feloul* elements – supporters of the old Mubarak régime – in the ranks of the NSF ironically strengthened Morsi's claim that it was not the Brotherhood, but the opposition that represented the counter-revolution. While both camps claimed to represent the revolutionary path against dictatorship, they each contained a mix of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, in which the counter-revolutionary leadership prevailed. The NSF was dominated by the military, while the movement supporting the presidency was led by the Ikhwan. This division showed the failure of Morsi to unite the ruling classes into a stable state, as well as the success of both counter-revolutionary camps to fragment, subordinate and absorb popular initiative and preventing the independent formation of subaltern leadership. By the end of 2012 vertical relations of hegemony between fractions of capital and their social base cut through the 2011 revolutionary horizontal alliance between middle classes, workers, peasants and youth.

At the end of April 2013, the Tamarod (Rebel) campaign was established, which collected signatures calling on President Morsi to step down. A wide range of leftist and rightist opposition forces participated in the door-to-door campaign, reconnecting national politics to the streets and workplaces. In this regard, Tamarod represented a new wave of popular mobilisation 'from below'. However, by deploying the concept of hegemony, it becomes clear that the nature of this mass movement was qualitatively different than that of the 2011 uprising. From its inception, Tamarod was infiltrated by elements of the Ministry of Interior and supported by both Mubarakist and opposition businessmen.⁹⁷ Whereas the state apparatus had tried to repress and divide the 2011 movement, now revolutionary activists became co-opted in a joint struggle against the Brotherhood. The class leadership of the mass movement consisted of the better-off, secular middle class, which saturated the protests with its reactionary slogans, appealing to the military leadership to liberate Egypt from the Ikhwan.⁹⁸

Tamarod launched the 30 June Front to organise protests against the President on the day that commemorated his first year in power, demanding his resignation. Morsi refused to step down, underlining his legitimacy as democratically elected president. On 1 July 2013

⁹⁷ Asma Alsharif and Yasmine Saleh, 'Special Report: The real force behind Egypt's 'revolution of the state'', *Reuters*, 10 October 2013. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-interior-special-report-idUSBRE99908D20131010> (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁹⁸ Sameh Naguib, 'From the End of One Revolutionary Wave to Preparing for Another', *openDemocracy*, 22 July 2014. Available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/sameh-naguib/from-end-of-one-revolutionary-wave-to-preparing-for-another> (accessed 25 February 2020).

Sisi, as head of the armed forces, issued an ultimatum to both camps to solve the crisis within 48 hours. After two more days of deadly clashes the 30 June Front met with military leaders. Once again, the absence of an independent revolutionary leadership allowed the military to play the role of arbiter.⁹⁹ Shortly after the meeting Sisi declared that President Morsi had been removed from his position and that chief Justice Adly Mansour would head a transitional government as interim president. Morsi was arrested and the army occupied key political and economic sites in the country.

Returning to Machiavelli's allegory of power it becomes clear that Sisi's hegemony was not grounded in a centauresque hybrid of a human upper body (=consent) standing on bestial legs (=coercion), but in a *minotauresque* monstrosity with a bull's torso (=military leadership) moving on human legs (=popular will). Tamarod was headed by the generals and their allies and put into motion by popular mass support. This 'counter-revolution from below' succeeded where two years of 'counter-revolution in democratic form' had failed: re-uniting the ruling classes and re-establishing their state. Not only did Sisi liquidate the Brotherhood as a political and economic competitor, but he succeeded in uniting under his leadership the warring factions within the Armed Forces;¹⁰⁰ the Ministry of Interior; the Mubarakist oligarchs; anti-regime businessmen; and the liberal and Nasserist opposition.

The 'concrete fantasy' of this counter-revolution from below was an *anti-myth*. Sisi's minotauresque leadership was not rooted in the masses' own prefiguration or utopian passion for liberation from oppression, but in their negative sentiments of fear and uncertainty, which were channelled into an authoritarian project of hysterical ultra-nationalism that revolved around the liquidation of the Brotherhood as the 'enemy within'.

The Thread of Revolution

The Prince of Tahrir was thrown in the labyrinth of counter-revolution, facing the minotaur at its centre. Even if the monster could be defeated, escaping from the maze was impossible without a thread. This thread was already unravelling in 2011. Towards the end of the 18-day occupation, the war of attrition between the Republic of Tahrir and the state was heading towards a violent resolution. Once a source of inspiration, Tunisia's example was now becoming a brake on the Egyptian insurrection, as revolutionaries still hoped that Mubarak would simply resign like Ben Ali had done. Revolutionary occupation, which had been the motor of the uprising in previous days, now became a bottleneck for its further development. Despite its evocative prefigurative activity, the emerging collective will at Tahrir lacked the necessary structures for coordination and direction. At the zenith of the occupation, Tahrir could have been turned into a constitutional assembly or a people's parliament, sharply positing the question of dual power and the revolutionaries' independence from existing forms of state power.

It is important to remember that in the end it was not the occupation of Tahrir that led to the fall of Mubarak, but the convergence of two other movements: demonstrations moving from Tahrir to sites of state power such as parliament, the presidential palace and army

⁹⁹ De Smet, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt'; De Smet, *Gramsci on Tahrir*.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 208.

barracks; and the entrance of workers as *class* actors – as opposed to political citizens – in the revolutionary process. In its early stages the lack of a centre leading the revolution had been an advantage to the movement: it was impossible for the state to defeat the masses by co-opting, dividing or liquidating their leadership. However, when a situation of dual power was gradually emerging, the masses needed to go beyond occupation. The absence of a directive centre – a hegemonic apparatus – locked the movement into its war of attrition. Once the government ended its capital strike on 7 February, workers began to strike, reigniting the uprising. They demanded the setting of a minimum wage, the employment of temporary workers, the return of privatised companies to the state, the reinstatement of workers fired for striking and equal pay for workers. Again Tahrir functioned as a key political laboratory: in the square, representatives of the four independent unions decided to constitute the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) as a potential centre for the workers' movement. Although workers often did not list the fall of the regime among their formal demands, they chanted the same radical slogans as the occupiers on Tahrir.¹⁰¹ Whereas the revolutionary mass movement had confronted capital in its concentrated but roundabout appearance as the state, the working class confronted capital directly at its many fragmented points of production and distribution, revealing the class nature of the state as it came to capital's aid. The strikes posed a direct threat to the economic structure of the regime.

When Mubarak was forced to step down, thousands of euphoric protesters remained overnight in the square to celebrate his departure. The following morning protesters debated if they should continue to occupy Tahrir to safeguard the military's promised transition to democracy. Once Mubarak had been removed, the 'system' was no longer represented in a tangible, concentrated form and its attributes – corruption, violence, authoritarianism, poverty and so on – became much more difficult to criticise concretely. Even though revolutionary change was embodied by the living experience of Tahrir, it was not articulated in a proper political programme with clear demands. Protesters faced the challenging task of grasping the meaning of their own prefigurative activity, which went far ahead of their verbally expressed demands, as well as understanding the political and economic structures of the 'system' they wished to overthrow. The military's 'soft coup' cut right through this collective process of learning and organisation.¹⁰² Subaltern hegemony is blocked when its prefigurative activity is halted. Tahrir Square was increasingly becoming a tourist site where T-shirts and souvenirs were sold, commemorating the revolutionary uprising instead of leading it.¹⁰³

After the departure of Mubarak, in order to transform the whole of the nation Tahrir had to turn itself inside out. Its revolutionary prefiguration had to be shared with neighbourhoods, villages and workplaces all over Egypt. The prefigurative politics of Tahrir had to shift from an imagination of an alternative society to the development of a hegemonic apparatus of the revolutionary movement, connecting the Square to the struggles waged

¹⁰¹ Hossam al-Hamalawy, 'Jan 25: The workers, middle class, military junta and the permanent revolution', *Arabawy*, 12 February 2011. Available at www.arabawy.org/2011/02/12/permanent-revolution (accessed 25 February 2020).

¹⁰² De Smet, *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt*.

¹⁰³ Laura Gribbon and Sarah Hawas, 'Signs and Signifiers: Visual Translations of Revolt', in *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, ed. Samia Mehrez (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), p. 135.

by the popular masses outside its borders, turning regime rejection into subaltern leadership. In fact, this process of expansion and integration was already embryonically present during the 18 days. Tahrir had become a meeting and discussion place for protesters between different Cairene neighbourhoods, provincial cities and rural areas. Farmers who were not able to return home when the regime closed the roads joined in the protests at Tahrir.¹⁰⁴ When protesters returned to their own social spaces, they transposed their prefigurative experience to these local sites of protests, sharing and diffusing the experience of Tahrir. However, these connections were anything but systematic and coherent.

During the 2011 uprisings protesters demanded not only freedom, but bread and social justice too, which reflected the entwinement of democratic and economic justice movements in the previous decade.¹⁰⁵ At first, specific working-class demands were subsumed under the political goals of the movement. However, in the two years after the collapse of the Republic of Tahrir popular mobilisation shifted toward the Egyptian working class, which protested against adverse working conditions, low wages and the petty dictatorships of the ‘little Mubaraks’ presiding over public and private companies. New and independent trade unions reached out to sections of the working class that hitherto had remained relatively passive: ‘Hospital doctors, mosque imams, fishermen, Tuk-Tuk drivers, skilled craftsmen, intellectual property rights consultants, daily-paid labourers and the operators of the “scarab boats” that take tourists on Nile river trips’.¹⁰⁶ Some 700,000 farmers joined one of the four independent organisations that emerged after the uprising.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps, if the Republic of Tahrir had been able to develop its own political organs then trade union structures such as the EFTU would have played an important role in the formation of popular power. But even if this had been the case, the independent trade unions that had developed over the past years ‘were too small in relation to the scale of the movement for their presence as an *organised* force to shape the overall outcome of the uprising, or even influence its direction much.’¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, independent trade unionism became divided between the radical EFTU of Kamal Abu Eita and the more moderate and cautious Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC) of Kamal Abbas. There was no coordinated collaboration between strikers, but only a *de facto* contemporaneity of worker protests. In short: the continuation of Tahrir’s prefigurative activity was necessary for a national workers’ movement to be established and, conversely, the development of class organisations were a precondition for the survival of the revolutionary project as a whole. This reflected the basic tasks of the revolution to succeed: a political, ‘democratic’ transformation could not succeed except by a reconfiguration of the economic structures, and the economic structures could not be transformed unless political power was captured and appropriated by the subaltern classes.

¹⁰⁴ Saker El-Nour, ‘Small Farmers and the Revolution in Egypt: The Forgotten Actors’, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8 no. 2 (2015): 198–211.

¹⁰⁵ Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Alexander, ‘The Egyptian Workers’ Movement and the 25 January Revolution’, *International Socialism Journal* no. 133 (9 January 2012): 114–15. Available at <https://isj.org.uk/the-egyptian-workers-movement-and-the-25-january-revolution/> (accessed 25 February 2020).

¹⁰⁷ El-Nour, ‘Small farmers and the revolution in Egypt’, pp. 203–4.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander, ‘The Egyptian Workers’ Movement and the 25 January Revolution’, p. 113.

Despite initiatives from leftist groups such as the Revolutionary Socialist Tendency and the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, a mass workers' party that was organically connected to the trade union movement did not materialise. What's more, the Nasserist wing of the workers' movement would prove instrumental to the regime in displacing workers' protests. Nasserist worker leaders were co-opted by the regime – the most famous example being Kamal Abu Eita, the EFITU leader who became Minister of Manpower in 2012. The 'transformism' of worker leaders such as Abu Eita was the coup de grâce for the EFITU, which was already weakened by internal strife. Secondly, the military mobilised the deep-seated resentment toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the workers' movement. Hence the political campaign against Morsi also became a means of subsuming the workers' movement under the leadership of the military. Thirdly, the military's promise of economic concessions, which echoed Nasserist redistributive policies, was often accepted by the workers.¹⁰⁹

Knotting the Thread

The 18 days of the uprising showed that a revolution is not the fixed expression of an already-present popular will, but a *generative process* of self-emancipating practices and ideas. Emancipation is not an object external to the revolutionary process, lying in wait until the masses establish it 'at once', but it is immanent in the process of revolution itself. Instead of a 'finished' prefiguration that had to be spatially expanded and emulated, Tahrir was a *moment* in the development of a revolutionary 'modern Prince'. This development was determined by the specific solutions it offered for overcoming the obstacles that were thrown into its path. With every forward step in the struggle against the regime, Tahrir was itself transformed. Tahrir illustrates that prefiguration does *not* simply emerge from the void that exists when state power is either pushed away or escaped. Struggle and prefiguration are *not* separate processes. On the contrary: prefigurative structures arise precisely when a movement interiorises practices of struggle that are initially outward-oriented, strategic, instruments, appropriating these practices as forms of mediation to develop its own agency. The means that protesters deployed to fight the state apparatus – the new forms of organisation, community and decision-making they developed – became ends-in-themselves, prefiguring an alternative society. The antagonistic state does not stand 'outside' the prefigurative process, but it is an integral part of it as it *reacts* to revolutionary agency and thereby shapes the structures of resistance that become structures of self-governance. The success and failure of prefigurative projects such as Tahrir cannot only be judged in terms of the capacities of revolutionaries to confront state power and build a 'modern Prince', but also on the basis of the counter-revolutionary agency of the regime and its ability to displace and disintegrate subaltern hegemony. In the case of Egypt, the initial weakness of revolutionary leadership and the historical ambiguity of the character of the armed forces in 2011 led to the abandonment of prefigurative politics, of a dual power strategy and of constructing an independent hegemonic apparatus. This in turn led to the self-subordination of the masses and most political activists, first to the counter-revolution in democratic form, then to a 'counter-revolution from below', which further weakened any subaltern hegemonic capacity.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 313.

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Cover Image

Graffiti on a wall in downtown Cairo, 2012, showing then-President Morsi seeing deposed President Mubarak in his reflection.

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