

## THE POLITICAL PEDAGOGY OF PROLETARIAN HEGEMONY

### Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Workers' Movement in the Face of Revolution

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#### Introduction

Labor protests have played a crucial role in the accumulation of discontent in the decade leading up to the 25 January 2011 mass uprisings in Egypt. From the 1990s onward, the state's rejection of its traditional patronage of the industrial working class led to rising conflicts in workplaces and their surrounding communities. Collective actions by workers addressed the state's increasingly violent politics of dispossession through liberalization, privatization, and austerity. These conflicts had a transformative impact on those labor protesters that changed their tactic from the 'work-in', which reinforced populist relations of loyalty and patronage, to the confrontational 'work-stoppage', which encouraged the formation of distinct class subjectivities against state and capital. The militant and successful strikes at the Spinning and Weaving Company in the industrial Nile Delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra played a vanguard role in this organizational and conceptual rebirth of the Egyptian workers' movement, leading to the constitution of new, independent trade unions.

Between 2008 and 2012 I investigated the Mahalla strikes as activities of collective learning that generate proletarian organizational and conceptual structures, and even embryonic forms of hegemony (class leadership). In order to comprehend these internal transformations, I integrated the pedagogy of Soviet cultural psychologist Lev Vygotsky with the political thought of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (cf. De Smet 2012; De Smet 2014; De Smet 2015).

Vygotsky's key insight that subject formation is the interiorization of external forms of mediation is connected to Gramscian concepts such as 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectuals; 'common sense'; and 'hegemony'. Conversely, Gramsci's emphasis on leadership is understood in cultural-historical terms: i.e., as forms of assistance that generalize, imagine, integrate, and organize a workers' movement as a collective actor. Vygotsky's distinction between learning and development is deployed to comprehend the fact that not all assistance was productive. Finally, drawing on Gramsci's notion of the necessity for a 'dialectical

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pedagogy', attention is paid to the (lack of) symmetry and reciprocity of collaborative relations between workers, and between workers and 'external' actors such as journalists, political activists, NGOs, human rights lawyers, etc.

### **Vygotsky's concept of learning**

Similar to non-Marxist psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky argued that the formation of the child's mind moves through a number of stages and takes place in relation to a particular social context. Vygotsky's novel approach was, firstly, to interpret the open-ended concept of 'context' or 'situation' as those specific external circumstances and relations that were relevant to the development of the child. Secondly, he understood the relation between the child and his social situation as a *predicament* from which the child has to emancipate itself. The child can only liberate himself from the restraints of its social situation by making a *development*: "[...] by a qualitative transformation of their own psychological structure and the structure of their relationship with those who are providing for their needs [...]" (Blunden 2010, 154). In other words, the child has to create those mental functions – *neoformations* in Vygotsky's jargon – which allow him to make a qualitative development that overcomes his condition.

The child's 'social situation of development' is not an absolute category, but a cultural-historical product: the whole field of expectations that parents and society at large develop vis-à-vis a child of a certain biological age. Through these expectations a child perceives the limits of its actual developmental phase. The conflict between, on the one hand, the child's desire and will to overcome his current social situation of development, and, on the other, the constraints of his condition, is the 'motor' behind the creation of new psychological functions and mental development as a whole (Vygotsky 2012, 115). Vygotsky conceptualized this contradiction as a situation of *crisis*, induced by the need for a certain neoformation while this function has not yet been developed.

Vygotsky observed that for each stage of development, one neoformation and one 'line of development' play a central part in developing the entire mental structure. Central or leading neoformations and lines of development of a previous phase continue to exist in the current stage, but lose their decisive role in the maturation of the whole (Vygotsky 2012, 114-6). For example, the development of memory as a psychological function pushes forward the maturation of the whole mental structure, opening up a new social situation of development for the child. In early school years the child 'thinks' by remembering. When this line of development has run its course, another neoformation takes over this leading role, and,

continuing the example, the child remembers by thinking. This also means that ‘learning’ is different from ‘development’. Learning to ride a bike at a certain age may push forward the whole motoric development of the infant, whereas mastering the same activity at a later age in adolescence merely adds a new competence to the repertoire.

When considering the activity of learning it seems logical to put competence before performance. Vygotsky, however, rejected the nativist argument that *a priori* structures allowed the child to learn and perform certain tasks: not already existing capacities enable performance, but the activity of performance itself constructs capacities (Ratner 1991, 182-183; Wertsch 2007, 188). Simply put, a child develops speech by trying to speak.

But how do ‘external’ performances create ‘internal’ competences? Vygotsky observed that: “An operation that initially represents an external activity is *reconstructed* and begins to occur *internally*” (Vygotsky 1978, 56). The notion of *interiorization* or ‘ingrowth’ posits that every neoformation appears twice: first ‘inter-mentally’, then ‘intra-mentally’ (cf. Bakhurst 2007, 53-54; Daniels 2007, 309; Meshcheryakov 2007, 162). The activity or performance is not simply ‘copied’ into an existing plane of consciousness as a competence, but the inward transference of neoformations is the process that develops such a mental plane. The practice is transformed during its interiorization, becoming similar yet different to its original objectification (Bakhurst 2007, 54).

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of *instruction* as a motor of ontogenesis (child development). Whereas Piaget argued that instruction should closely *follow* the independent and ‘natural’ path of ontogenesis, Vygotsky argued that instruction had to *lead* development. There is a difference between the degree to which a child can solve a problem on its own, and its capacity to accomplish a task in collaboration with others (Vygotsky 2012, 198). Vygotsky described this tension as the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*: [...] the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978, 86).

The role of instruction in the learning process is to motivate development, i.e. to assist the individual subject in creating those neoformations that allow it to overcome its social situation of development. Vygotsky emphasized that instruction is only effective when it is ‘proleptic’; when it anticipates or imagines competence through the representation of a future act or development as already existing: “[...] the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the

ripening functions. [...] instruction must be oriented toward the future, not the past” (Vygotsky 2012, 200).

Meshcheryakov (2007) distinguished between two forms of proleptic instruction: *autoprolepsis* and *heterolepsis*. *Autoprolepsis* is a form of self-instruction, whereby a child casts itself in the role of a future, more developed self. A classic example from ontogenesis is that of a child playing adult roles, projecting itself in a more advanced stage of its own trajectory. *Heterolepsis*, on the other hand, is the interpellation of a potential capacity of a child by another agent. For example: a parent speaking to her young child as if it were a more mature conversation partner, even though it has not yet (fully) developed the capacity to engage in such a dialogue. The potential development of the child is called into being by the proleptic instruction of the parent.

### **Gramsci’s intellectuals**

The struggle of workers against company management produces new organizational and discursive forms, which are originally oriented externally, as means to mediate the relations between workers and ‘bosses’. But this instrument also turns inward, organizing and structuring the collective activity of the workers into, for example, a trade union. The reciprocal relation between external and internal development elucidates class formation as, at its core, a process of collective learning. Similar to ontogenesis, proleptic instruction plays a crucial role in collective learning processes, as it leads development: it assists and stimulates workers in creating those neoformations that allow them to overcome their social situation of development. Proletarian examples of *autoprolepsis* are wildcat strikes that imagine grassroots and independent trade unions; workers’ control over factories that illustrate their potential of running the economy without capitalists; and practices of participation, election, and discussion within the movement that foreshadow forms of participative democracy. Moreover, politically ‘advanced’ workers show ‘backward’ layers the possible future and outcome of their current struggle.

*Heterolepsis*, on the other hand, represents the instructive relation between worker and non-worker actors. Transferring the ontogenetic notion of *heterolepsis* to the domain of class formation is a delicate exercise, as it should avoid paternalist and elitist interpretations of emancipation. Obviously, workers are not children and a political ‘pedagogy’ is qualitatively different from the typical teacher-student relation. I argue that Gramsci’s concept of ‘intellectuals’ offers a concrete solution to understand instructive assistance in the context of workers’ struggles.

Gramsci stressed that every human activity requires a degree of intellect and that pure practice or theory do not exist. In that sense, every human is an intellectual and a philosopher (Gramsci 1971, 347). However, just as the historical division of labor made some men into farmers, it consolidated others as intellectuals. Each class produces its own specialists who fulfill a social function in the realm of production, culture or politics. Organic intellectuals are those specialists whose development is interwoven with the historical formation of the class they represent. Traditional intellectuals, on the other hand, are lingering specialists from a bygone era, who perceive themselves as autonomous and independent from the current ruling classes because they survived the social form from which they emerged (Gramsci 1971, 5-7).

Loosely following Gramsci we could distinguish three archetypical forms of instruction that lead development. Firstly, directive instruction mediates the formation of relations of leadership and consent. Individual strike, demonstration, trade union, and party leaders are given a mandate and are endowed with authority to make decisions representing the interests of the whole group. These leaders embody the spatial generalization of the proletarian project as their individual person mediates the movement of the whole collective. Secondly, cultural instruction, elaborated by artists, educators, philosophers, writers, and so on, articulate the worldview and aesthetics of the movement. They integrate everyday meanings and concepts with historical traditions, texts, and signs, and through art and literature they imagine future lines of development. Thirdly, technical instruction mediates the procedural and organizational production and reproduction of the workers' activity as a cohesive system. Organizers set up strike funds and editors publish newspapers and journals. In actuality, different persons may embody different instructive functions, and their instructive position may change over time.

The developing project of organic intellectuals is facilitated by the assistance of traditional intellectuals. Through the media progressive journalists share particular class experiences with the whole workers' community and other subaltern groups. Labor lawyers defend specific cases, which become precedents for the struggle of other workers. Artists, cartoonists and writers universalize class subjectivities in an aesthetic form. Philosophers and academics combine disjointed stories of worker protests into a coherent narrative of class struggle.

Different class projects require different modes of assistance to organize and secure their hegemony and domination. Bourgeois pedagogy, based on 'coercive consent', is qualitatively distinct from proletarian pedagogy (Thomas 2009, 416). Gramsci proposed that the workers' hegemony, i.e. class leadership, was realized through a dialectical pedagogy: a

reciprocal process of learning and instruction between intellectuals and masses, the workers' movement and its subaltern allies. Gramsci's notion of a dialectical pedagogy was influenced by Marx's third Thesis on Feuerbach (Thomas 2009, 436), which stressed that "the educator must himself be educated". Within a healthy and authentic development of the worker's movement there is no stable, unilateral, top-down relation between 'teachers' and 'students'. Rather, there is a continuous reciprocity and mutual proleptic instruction between workers and their allies. Solidarity is the mode of collaboration that leads internal class formation and forges alliances between subaltern actors. However, the workers' movement can also be colonized or commodified by other actors, which may lead to a pathological development.

### **The Mahalla Movement**

Between 2004 and 2010 some two million Egyptian workers went on strike (Clément, 2011: 71). To quell labor unrest, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif promised in 2006 all public-sector manufacturing workers a raise of their annual bonus equal to a two-month wage. When Mahalla workers came to claim their additional benefit they only received their old bonus, which led to a spontaneous demonstration on 7 December in front of the factory gates of at least 10,000 workers. When the security forces tried to shut down the factory the next morning, some 20,000 workers, joined by students and women, demonstrated (Beinin & al-Hamalawy, 2007).

The Mahalla strike started as a simple sit-in in front of the factory gates with a straightforward objective: obtaining the promised bonus. Because the management did not immediately give in to the demand, the sit-in became a work-stoppage that lasted for three days. The realities of a protracted strike necessitated the development of new directive, technical, and discursive competences (Bassiouny and Omar 2008; al-Mahdi 2011). The factory had to be occupied by workers in order to prevent security forces of taking over the premises and continuing production. These workers needed food, shelter and protection. As the state-controlled General Federation of Trade Union (GFETU) representatives were mobilizing against the strike, the workers had to create their own structures to direct and organize the protests struggle (S. Habib, personal communication, November 12, 2010). Strike committee leaders were conceived of as the "real" and organic leaders of the Mahalla movement. They demanded the resignation of the GFETU delegates from the General Union of Textile Workers and fair trade-union elections. Almost 13,000 workers from Mahalla signed the petition. When their request was ignored, some 6,000 workers quit from the GFETU (Beinin & al-Hamalawy, 2007). In September 2007 and February 2008 Mahalla

workers went again on strike. The protesters demanded a national minimum wage and also raised political slogans against the president (al-Hamalawy, 2008).

Neo-formations such as strike committees, mass meetings, sit-ins and “tent-cities” stimulated collective debate and decision making (Alexander, 2010). During their strikes workers implicitly realized the rights of assembly, protest and free speech which the Egyptian civil-democratic movement had explicitly yet unsuccessfully called for. In practice the Mahalla activity-system was “... already operating as an independent trade-union” (M. Bassiouni, personal communication, October 12, 2010).

The success of the activity-system that sprang from the strike actions also acted as a brake on its immediate development. When the workers achieved their demands after four or five days of strike, the development of their strike activity and its direct objectifications obviously came to a halt. However, during and after the strike activity, its objectifications were also being interiorized into the fledgling workers’ movement. Firstly, victory reinforced the workers’ consciousness: it had been their collective will and agency as organized striking workers that had realized their demands. Objective success was translated into subjective confidence. The Mahalla workers knew that they could deploy the same kind of activity in the future to defend their interests. Secondly, when they faced the same problems of unpaid bonuses in 2007, they did not have to begin protesting from scratch, but they could immediately import and build upon their experiences from the previous year. Thirdly, even though the strike was initiated because of a goal external to the activity of striking from its own life-process emerged new goals and aims. A basic economic struggle for livelihoods developed into a ‘higher’ conflict for national labor rights, and eventually into a political confrontation with the régime.

The industrial complex in Mahalla is of economic and symbolic importance to the whole Egyptian workers movement. Since the 1930s the factory has often acted as the vanguard of the working class, initiating important strikes and articulating the interests of the whole Egyptian working class (Beinin & al-Hamalawy, 2007). The saliency of the victory of the Mahalla movement constituted a form of heterolepsis for other workers to wage similar struggles, using analogous methods, in order to get the same results (T. Shukr, personal communication, April 21, 2009). Spontaneous actions in solidarity with the Mahalla workers imagined a syndicalist unity which was not yet institutionalized: “For example the workers at Kafr ad-Dawwar made a symbolic strike for two hours. In Shibin al-Qom also for two hours and in Giza for three hours. Other factories made statements in solidarity with us” (S. Habib, personal communication, November 12, 2010). “We supported the Mahalla workers by

statements and by organizing protests in Cairo in front of the GFETU or parliament” (S. Omar, personal communication, October 17, 2010). In this manner, the spatio-temporal particularity of the Mahalla strike was overcome through its continuous reenactment by other worker activity-systems. By sharing strike experiences and organizational and discursive forms, the development which the Mahalla workers made within their own movement became co-present in the lifeworld of many workers, even though the workers were still far from being centrally organized on a national level. Mahalla had become a role model of resistance through which workers quickly learned from their peers (H. Fouad, personal communication, October 26, 2010). It was this proleptic instruction that enthused other workers, first in the textile companies, then in other industrial sectors, and ultimately in the proletarian ‘periphery’ – for example real estate tax workers, health technicians, teachers, and pensioners – to emulate the Mahalla experience (Bassiouny and Omar 2008). Moreover, more than just a means to an end, the strike revealed to the workers the contours of an authentic democratic society, which existed in opposition to the paternalism and the dictatorship of the factory, the community, and the state. As a faint prefiguration of workers’ democracy, the strike represented also an end-in-itself: living a less alienating human life.

### **Assistance**

Leaders and activists of previous decades were interpellated and reactivated by contemporary worker actions, and new organic intellectuals were produced through the activity of protest itself. The strikes of the 1990s and 2000s called the old worker leaders of the 1970s and 1980s back into action and from the labor protests themselves emerged a layer of new, young activists. In addition, traditional intellectuals such as journalists, lawyers, human rights and political activists, writers and artists offered the workers’ movement directive, technical and especially cultural forms of assistance. Firstly, because of their social function, mobility, and position as intellectuals in civil society at large, non-proletarian actors could more easily *generalize* the experiences, methods, and lessons from one ‘horizontal’ instance of struggle to another. They acted as liaisons between organic proletarian intellectuals, literally mediating the internal communication and consciousness of the decentralized workers’ movement. Even though workers were still ‘physically’ confined to the particular instances of their separate protests, their struggles became conceptually connected through shared demands and practices. This type of assistance was not only spatial, but also temporal. Traditional intellectuals sometimes acted as an auxiliary reservoir of the collective memory of the working class: when ‘old’ proletarian intellectuals were, for



whatever reason, cut off from the embryonic ‘fresh’ organic layers, then traditional intellectuals such as political activists, journalists, writers, and so on, transferred class experiences to the new generation.

This form of cultural assistance can be described as *connection*. With regard to concept formation in ontogenesis, Vygotsky observed a transition from syncretism to thinking in complexes. Put simply, this developmental process contains the connection of objects on the basis of objective bonds and relations, based on association, function, sequence, and so on. Transposed to the domain of proletarian sociogenesis connective assistance brings experiences from different spatial and temporal instances of struggle together and allows workers to share their competences and methods. It mediates the horizontal, reciprocal learning process between workers, enabling them to instruct one another and push their mutual development forward. However, “[...] there is no hierarchical organization of the relations between different traits of the object [...] the structural center of the formation may be absent altogether” (Vygotsky 2012, 124). Connective assistance creates relations between worker projects, but it does not organize them as a cohesive whole.

Secondly, by a ‘vertical’ projection of individual worker struggles into the sphere of national civil society, e.g., in the media, traditional intellectuals made the spatially isolated strikes directly contemporaneous to the lives of many workers. Through the mediation of, especially, newspapers articles and blog posts, workers got to know that their comrades in other companies struck to overcome problems similar to their own. They realized that they shared the same goal and that the objective of their strike activity was, for all purposes, the same. Traditional intellectuals enabled workers to imagine and generalize themselves as a coherent and cohesive working class despite the fact that they were far from organized as a national workers’ movement. Furthermore, this projection influenced the attitudes of other societal actors towards the workers, calling them ‘back to class’.

This form of cultural assistance can be described as *projection*. With regard to concept formation in ontogenesis, Vygotsky noted that the ‘bridge’ between thinking in complexes and thinking in real concepts was the *pseudoconcept*: “[...] the appearance of a concept that conceals the inner structure of a complex” (Vygotsky 2012, 127). When faced with a ready-made concept, children cannot directly absorb it, but they build complexes around it: “What we see here is the complex that, in practical terms, coincides with the concept, embracing the same set of objects. Such a complex is a ‘shadow’ of the concept, its contour” (Vygotsky 2012, 130). Transposed to the domain of proletarian sociogenesis projective assistance helps the workers to generalize their struggle from the local, particular to the national, general level.

It mediates the ‘vertical’ sublation of the spatial fragmentation of the working class by a heteroleptic imagining of the workers as a collective actor.

Thirdly, journalists, writers, and activists helped to develop the particular grievances of the Mahalla strikers into general demands and self-concepts of the working class. Basic conceptual generalizations, such as a fair national minimum wage and a solution for the position of temporary workers, unified workers from different sectors and lifted their struggle from the economic-particular to a national trade unionist level. More advanced generalizations posited the strikes as indices of class activity and consciousness, and emphasized the agency of the workers.

This form of cultural assistance can be described as integration. Vygotsky observed that: “When the process of concept formation is seen in all its complexity, it appears as a movement of thought within the pyramid of concepts, constantly alternating between two directions: from the particular to the general, and from the general to the particular” (Vygotsky 2012, 152). Integration represents the intertwining of everyday experiences of exploitation and a political-economic critique of capital, class, and the state.

Traditional intellectuals came to the budding workers’ movement with various interests, attitudes and methods, which were not all beneficial to the development of the struggle. Political activists from *Kefaya* and the Muslim Brotherhood were accused by Mahalla workers and labor activists of ignoring the workers’ demands and of recuperating the workers’ movement for their own democratic project (B. Abdul, personal communication, May 10, 2009). The colonizing attitude of civil-democratic actors led on 6 April 2008 to an important setback for the entire Egyptian workers’ movement. When Mahalla worker leaders and activists planned a new strike, political groups, bloggers and student activists seized the event to call for a “general strike” or “day of anger” against the regime, without, however, organizing anything on the ground. Unlike the 6 April Movement activists, the worker leaders realized that such a test of strength did not lie in the ZPD of the Egyptian workers’ movement at that time. The security forces acted with a pre-emptive lock-out, arriving in the factory before the first workers and taking over the machines (al-Hamalawy 2008). The workers cancelled their strike and joined the citizens in their demonstrations, which quickly took on a political form when posters of Mubarak were torn apart (Clément, 2011: 73). The protesters were met by violence and the insurrection was quelled. Despite some symbolic solidarity actions in other cities, in general the adventurist call for a “mass strike” was not heeded and the Mahalla uprising remained isolated (S. Habib, personal communication, November 12, 2010). This episode spelled the end of the vanguard role of the Mahalla workers.

Journalists from the whole Egyptian spectrum came to the strike movement because it constituted a newsworthy event. As long as the movement remained a hot topic, this attitude did not have a negative effect on the movement as it enabled workers to reach out to other layers of the working class and the political community. There was a trade between workers producing an event and journalists sharing these events as news with civil society at large. However, as soon as the saliency and novelty of a particular strike diminished, it lost its status as “event” and most journalists became disengaged with the movement (F. Lakusha, personal communication, 20 October, 2010). Much more damaging to the workers’ movement than the sometime opportunistic intervention of journalists was the role of those political organizations which saw the strikes primary as a means of accumulating members and influence (S. Barakat, personal communication, 16 October, 2010).

After the defeat of the Mahalla strike on 6 April 2008, the workers’ movement lost its center of gravity. Activity-systems in the “periphery” of the traditional proletariat – the real estate tax workers, the teachers, the health professionals, and the pensioners – were the first workers’ movements to establish trade unions that operated independently from the GFETU. These groups could immediately import the experiences, practices and ideas of the Mahalla workers into their own struggle. Moreover, since 2009 workers increasingly protested in front of parliament, almost physically introducing their local and particular strike to the space of national politics. This autoproleptic chain of continuous “strikes” in the national sphere imagined separate instances of struggle as part of one coherent workers’ movement, and it enabled workers’ to generalize their separate and particular experiences into shared class demands, such as the minimum wage.

Before the 25 January Revolution the ZPD of the workers’ movement was limited by the Mubarak dictatorship. While the establishment of independent trade unions had shown the potential development for the whole workers’ movement, the crushed Mahalla uprising served as a warning for the industrial “core” of workers not to challenge state power. The “school” of revolutionary instruction would radically expand the proletarian ZPD after 25 January 2011.

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