

The Prince and the Pharaoh

**The Collaborative
Project of
Egyptian Workers
and
Their Intellectuals
in the Face of
Revolution**

Brecht De Smet

**Dissertation presented in fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD degree
in Political and Social Sciences 2012**

Ghent University



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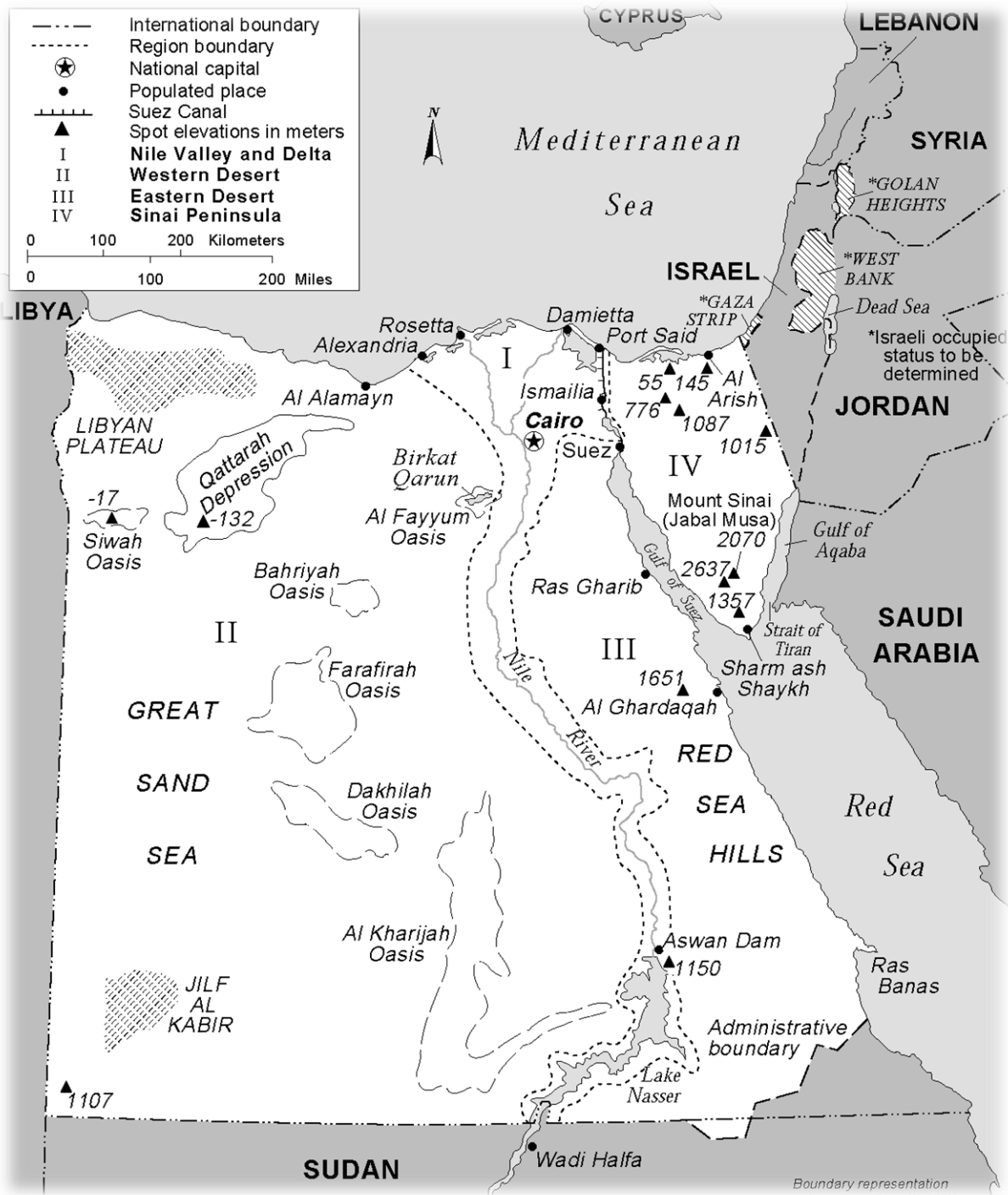
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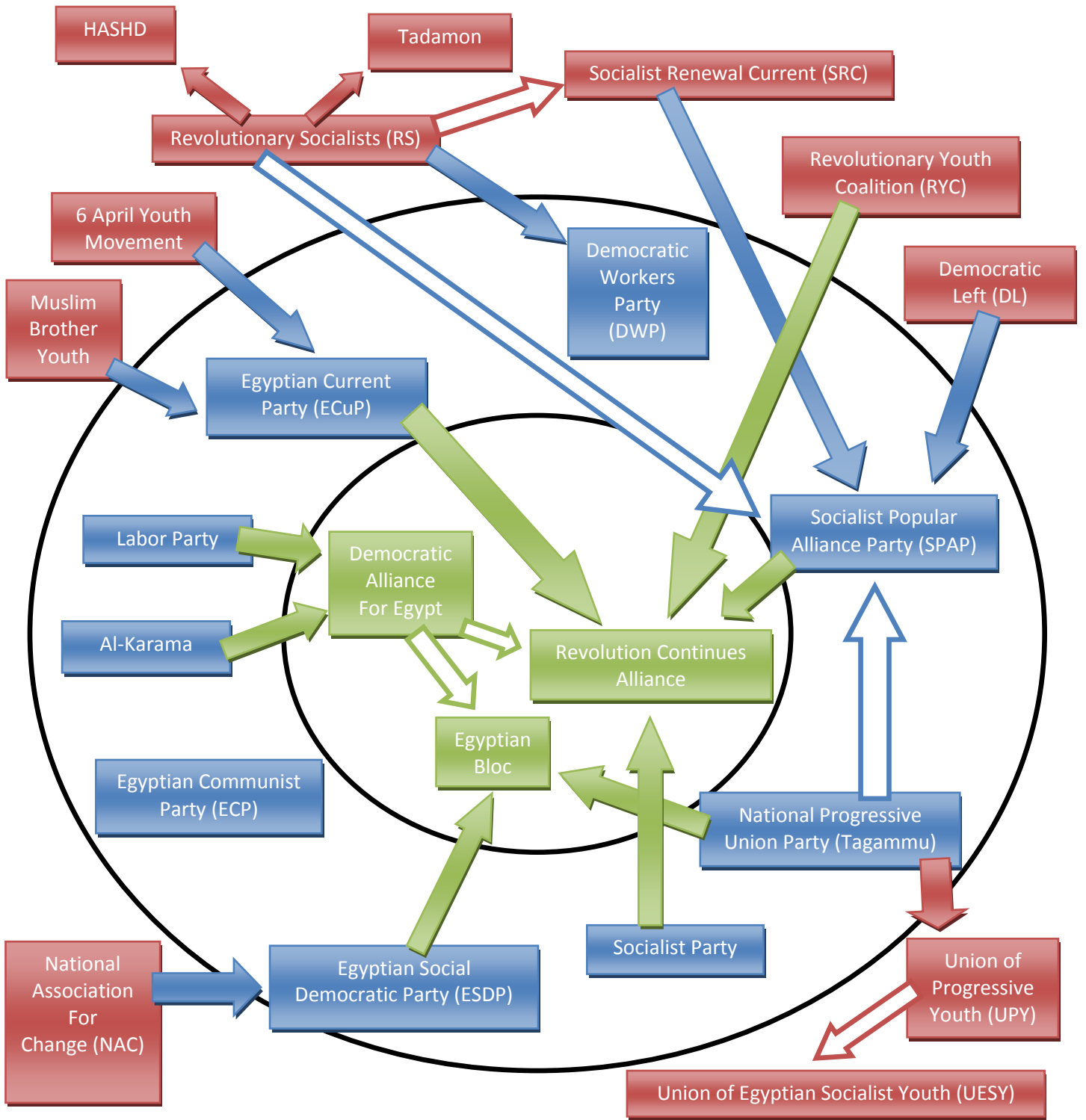
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The Egyptian Left in 2011



Movements & Organizations

Created Organization

Organizational Split

Political Parties

Created Party

Party Split

Electoral Coalitions

Joined Coalition

Coalition Split

Acronyms

AAPSO	African-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization
AARC	African Arab Research Center
ADNP	Arab Democratic Nasserist Party
ASU	Arab Socialist Union
CETU	Congress of Egyptian Trade Unions
CIHRS	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
CPE	Communist Party of Egypt
CSF	(General Security and) Central Security Forces (Al-Amn al-Markazi)
CSS	Center for Socialist Studies
CTUWS	Center for Trade union and Workers' Services
CTWU	Cairo Tramway Workers' Union
CYR	Coalition of Youth Revolution
DMNL	Democratic Movement for National Liberation
ECESR	Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights
ECP	Egyptian Communist Party
EMNL	Egyptian Movement for National Liberation
ESDP	Egyptian Social Democratic Party
ESP	Egyptian Socialist Party
EFITU	Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions
FCGFETU	Founding Committee for a General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions
FWD	Forum for Women in Development
GFETU	General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions
GFLU	General Federation of Labor Unions
GFLUKE	General Federation of Labor Unions in the Kingdom of Egypt
HASHD	The Popular Democratic Movement for Change
HMLC	Hisham Mubarak Law Center
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialization
MTWU	Manual Trades Workers' Union
NCWS	National Committee for Workers and Students
NDP	National Democratic Party
NDF	National Democratic Front.
NFTUE	National Federation of Trade Unions in Egypt.
NWF	New Woman Foundation
PPT	Political Process Theory
SPAP	Socialist Popular Alliance Party
RETAU	Real Estate Tax Authority Union

RS	Revolutionary Socialists
SCAF	Supreme Council of Armed Forces
SLCHR	Sons of Land Center for Human Rights
SMT	Social Movement Theory
SRC	Socialist Renewal Current
SSI	State Security Investigations Service
SSoD	Social Situation of Development
TUCDL	Trade Union Committee for the Defense of Liberties
U&CD	Uneven and Combined Development
UESY	Union of Egyptian Socialist Youth.
UPY	Union of Progressive Youth.
WCNL	Workers' Committee for National Liberation.
WNDP	Workers National Democratic Party
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

A Word of Gratitude

I would like to thank my supervisor, Sami Zemni, for his unwavering faith in my academic capacities – especially on those occasions when I doubted them myself. As early as 2008, when I came to Sami’s office for the first time, asking if there was a possibility for me to obtain a doctoral degree at the Center of Third World Studies, he encouraged me “to do my thing”. He offered me the freedom to explore “antiquated” research themes like the workers’ movement, class, and the Left in Egypt. Despite my engagement with esoteric concepts as “prolepsis”, “Subjectness”, and “Zone of Proximal Development”, my unfashionable “grand narrative” approach (well, what do you expect with such “grand problems”!), and my fancy for “dead dogs” such as Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci, Sami continued to support my research confidently and without hesitation.

Moreover, together with Christopher Parker, Sami has created a stimulating academic environment within the Middle East and North Africa Research Group that encourages critical thinking, internal debate, and relaxed and friendly work relations. This dissertation is also a product of this implicit “collaborative Project” and the many discussions I had with my colleagues at the MENARG. Especially Sami, Chris, Koen, Pascal, Marlies, Omar, Annemie, and Siggi – I have learned a lot from all of you.

I also wish to express my appreciation for my respondents and contacts in Egypt – in particular Ahmed Belal, who helped me the first time I arrived in Cairo for my fieldwork to initiate my “snowball sampling” of primary sources, and who continued to assist me throughout my research; and my two translators and friends Haisam Hassan and Fatma al-Sayyed Muhammad. You made my research and stay in Egypt not only an interesting, but also a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

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PROLOGUE

Problems, Questions, and Methods

...in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1970: 53)

Self-Emancipation and Division of Labor

The central problematic of this dissertation is the contradiction between the principle of self-emancipation and the historical division of labor. Isolated from a long, personal history of experience, contemplation, research, and soul searching, this sentence appears as a rather pompous declaration to begin a PhD with. Yet, when I look back at the development of both my political activism and my academic research in the past decade, I realize that most of my writings already implicitly dealt with this question; as a way of understanding the role I myself possibly *could* and ethically *ought* to play as a fledgling scholar-activist in processes of emancipation.

In his critique of the Gotha Program, Marx emphasized that: *“The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves.”*¹ At the time, this constituted a revolutionary principle that rejected previous paternalist traditions whereby an enlightened elite, Blanquist vanguard, or “Savior-Ruler” acted as the emancipator of a subaltern² group. In the same spirit, Alan Johnson defined self-emancipation as: *“...a political process in which the oppressed author their own liberation through popular struggles which are educational, producing a cognitive liberation, and instrumental, enabling the defeat of their oppressors.”*³ Real emancipation entails the development of the capacity of a group to emancipate itself.⁴

¹ Marx 2008: 28.

² Term used by Gramsci to denote groups that are the object of domination and hegemony.

³ Johnson 2001: 98.

⁴ Note that this did not preclude the need for a “leadership” **within** the workers’ movement, as Johnson explained: *“The idea of self-emancipation, in liberating people from the need for liberators, can seem to deny the need for leaders at all. It certainly denies the necessity for a Power From Above to deliver liberation to the poor benighted subjects below. Yet there are two reasons why we can’t get rid of leadership*

Yet, Marx and Engels also drew attention to a fundamental predicament of human emancipation: the historical separation between theory and practice,⁵ mental and material labor: i.e. the social division of labor constitutive of class society.

From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc...⁶

The growing social division of labor has created a distinction between practice and thought by separating a category of professional “ideologists” from the rest of society. The social separation between theory and practice brought Karl Kautsky, the leading theoretician of the Second International, to the conclusion that the idea of socialism had to be brought to the workers from without:

*...socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the **bourgeois intelligentsia** [emphasis by Kautsky]: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians... Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.⁷*

Even though other Marxists rejected Kautsky’s paternalist view of workers as the passive receivers of “theory” from bourgeois intellectuals, most of them did not

so easily: unevenness in the consciousness of the emancipatory subject, and the organised opposition of the adversary.” (Johnson 2001: 113)

⁵ Obviously there is no “pure” historical dichotomization between theory and practice; Marx rather drew attention to the emergence of “pure” theory. I discuss this in more detail in *Chapter 3 Learning and Instruction*.

⁶ Marx and Engels 1970: 52.

⁷ Kautsky in Lenin 1973: 47.

investigate critically their own role as non-proletarian⁸ actors within the development of the workers' movement. As the great "thinkers" and "leaders" of the socialist movement emerged from the ranks of the (petty) bourgeoisie,⁹ how could and should they assist the development of the workers' movement without appropriating it for their own benefit? From the perspective of the self-emancipation of the working class, what forms of instruction and assistance were necessary, possible, and ethical?

This problematic did not only reflect a theoretical and historical discussion: it also articulated my own experience and activity in both the political and academic fields. At the age of fifteen I pledged myself a Marxist and became involved in fringe politics. As I slowly came to understand (various interpretations of) Marxism and as I experienced the often nefarious practices of leftist politics, I was struck by, on the one hand, the distance between revolutionary thought and the everyday working class "lifeworld", and, on the other, the implicit or explicit, willing or unwilling forms of substitutionalism¹⁰ – despite the emphasis of Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto that communists "...do no set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."¹¹

My first Master thesis implicitly touched upon this issue, as it dealt with the historical dynamics of political sectarianism in the Belgian Trotskyist organization "Vonk" (Spark) of which I was a member at that time. My second Master thesis aimed to understand the reciprocal relation between political thought and activity through the figure of the Iranian Islamist Ali Shariati.

Yet, it was my fieldwork in Egypt from 2008 onwards that, for the first time, saliently posed the problem *in practice*, allowing me to develop my intuitions on the subject matter. Whereas my original doctoral research proposal was focused

⁸ Throughout most of the text, I use "proletarians" in its broadest sense of modern wage laborers who, as a category, are the product of the historical process of proletarianization: i.e. the separation of producers from their means of production. From this historical class point of view, a Western worker who owns a house and earns a decent wage is equally "proletarian" as an Egyptian public sector worker who struggles to secure his or her means of existence. Obviously, this does not mean that both workers share the same consciousness – I discuss this further in the text.

⁹ See, e.g., Sassoon 1997.

¹⁰ Substituting the agency of the working class with that of the vanguard party, the State, the leadership, the Leader, et cetera.

¹¹ Marx and Engels 1998: 50.

on the discursive production and reproduction of Islamic intellectuals in Egypt, my experiences in the field swiftly reoriented my investigations towards the relation between intellectuals and activists, especially leftists¹², and the workers' movement. I was impressed by the extent to which the Mahalla strikes between 2006 and 2008 had called many leftists "back to class". After the disintegration of the civil-democratic *Kefaya* movement, the workers' movement seemed on its way to becoming the core of opposition to the Mubarak regime¹³. Leftist actors were confronted with the question of how they could assist in politicizing the workers' movement without "hijacking" it for their own goals.

In this dissertation I reveal the different modes and types of assistance that the workers' movement received from "external", i.e. non-proletarian, forces. In order to conceptualize the ethico-pedagogical relation between non-worker and worker actors, I have developed a methodology that draws upon various "disciplines" within the broad Marxist tradition,¹⁴ and that voluntarily subjugates itself to Andy Blunden's call to and project for an interdisciplinary emancipatory science.¹⁵ My methodological approach takes the agency and development of the workers' movement as both its scientific subject matter and ethico-political principle. It does not conceive of "populations" as passive objects of descriptive research and politics of control, but as **actors** in their own right.

This approach is also inscribed in the "heterodox" tradition of Middle Eastern Studies,¹⁶ which opposes the main academic and political narratives that frames

¹² Instead of defining from the start the category of "leftists" according to a set of fixed attributes, I prefer to use the notion for all those who consider themselves "leftists" in the Egyptian context. Among these leftists can be found the different ideological strands of Marxism, Stalinism, Maoism, Trotskyism, reformism, Nasserism, popular nationalism; various organizations and organizational forms; new and old generations; armchair intellectuals and street activists; et cetera. My primary interest is not an analysis of the "real" leftists as opposed to "rightists", but a conception of the variety of ways in which "intellectuals" – in the Gramscian sense – assist the development of a worker Subject. In my experience, most of these intellectuals, from socialists to human rights activists, will agree with the common, vague denominator of "leftist".

¹³ I do not often employ the term "regime" in the text. Instead I prefer to use the Gramscian concepts of "State" – either in its "integral" sense or as "political society" – "historical bloc", and "hegemony" to denote certain complexes of actors, activities, and material and ideational forms. These concepts are explained in *Part I Methodology*.

¹⁴ Especially those interpretations which focus on the development of human agency as the core of a critical emancipatory praxis (e.g. the "young" Marx; Lukács; the Lenin of the Philosophical Notebooks; Gramsci; Ilyenkov; Blunden).

¹⁵ Blunden 2010.

¹⁶ See, e.g., the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP).

the region's populations as passive objects of religion, tradition, and authoritarianism. The Iraqi poet and novelist Sinan Antoon mused that in the eyes of the world the Middle East had become "...a place where the burden of the past weighed so heavily and the cultural DNA somehow preconditioned those who carried it to feel more at home with tyrants and terror."¹⁷ The roots of this defeatist discourse stretched back to the era of Western colonialism, which presented the Arab masses as uneducated, backward and thus incapable of self-emancipation. At the end of the nineteenth century Lord Cromer emphatically ruled out the possibility of self-determination of the Egyptian people:

*Can any sane man believe that a country which has for centuries past been exposed to the worst forms of misgovernment at the hands of its rulers, from Pharaohs to Pashas, and in which, but ten years ago, only 9.5 percent of the men and 0.3 percent of the women could read and write, is capable of suddenly springing into a position which will enable it to exercise full rights of autonomy with advantage to itself and to others interested in its welfare? The idea is absurd.*¹⁸

More than a century later, on the first day of the 25 January Revolution, an article appeared on the BBC website, echoing Cromer: "Egypt has many of the same social and political problems that brought about the unrest in Tunisia - rising food prices, high unemployment and anger at official corruption."¹⁹ Yet, it immediately downplayed the possibility of a revolutionary Tunisian scenario in Egypt by pointing out that: "However, the population of Egypt has a much lower level of education than Tunisia. Illiteracy is high and internet penetration is low."²⁰ The colonialist premise of Lord Cromer that despotism and a lack of formal education constituted absolute obstacles to the self-determination of a people was still shared by political commentators and scholars of the region today.²¹

The "Arab Spring"²² saliently re-introduced the notions of revolution and self-emancipation to the dominant perceptions of the region. According to Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel, the popular democratic revolt and the (re)appearance of "the

¹⁷ Antoon 2011a.

¹⁸ In Seikaly and Ghazaleh 2011.

¹⁹ BBC News 2011.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In Seikaly and Ghazaleh 2011.

²² I am not particularly fond of the term, because it introduces many doubtful connotations to the study of the revolts (e.g. sudden renewal after a long "winter"; cyclical nature of the process; et cetera).

masses” as a societal agent revealed the inadequacy of a discipline that studied the region through the lens of enduring political authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and economic backwardness.²³ Antoon sarcastically remarked that: *“Too many trees were killed theorizing about the region’s inhospitability to democracy.”*²⁴ Sherene Seikaly and Pascale Ghazaleh criticized those who claim that the populations of the Middle East are too ignorant to emancipate themselves: *“Democratic participation, in these stubborn lexicons, is not a right but something earned and learned.”*²⁵ While I agree with their sentiment, I would argue that democratic participation is not an abstract *right*, but a concrete *capacity* that is definitely *earned and learned*; because genuine emancipation is not *granted* by an authoritarian regime or taught by a paternalist pedagogy, but organically *conquered* through the process of collective struggle.

The Reconstruction of the Subject

The Arab Spring came as a shock, not only for Western “colonial” observers, but also for Arab activists and intellectuals, as Seikaly and Ghazaleh pointed out:

*It is not simply colonial overlords, authoritarian regimes, and Western arms dealers that attempt to produce the Arab people as children to be herded. Arab elitist discourse has played one of the most crucial and sustaining roles in producing the people as passive, easily manipulated children. Arab intellectuals reproduce a pervasive and ongoing divide between the “educated” and the “uneducated”... Elites are reproducing the very infantilization of the people that has buttressed colonial, authoritarian, and neo-colonial domination.*²⁶

A majority of Arab intellectuals were not able to imagine the “people” – *al-sha’b* – let alone the working class, as a self-determining agent. Although most of them acknowledged the “masses” as a formidable social force, they saw them as a power that could be mobilized by a third party, rather than as self-conscious actor in their own right. In the end, *al-sha’b* was just a category from which “Savior-Rulers” such as Gamal Abd al-Nasser drew their legitimacy. However, the paternalist pedagogy of many Arab intellectuals did not reflect a regional history without mass movements. Elliott Colla reminded us that:

²³ Beinin and Vairel 2011: 1.

²⁴ Antoon 2011a.

²⁵ Seikaly and Ghazaleh 2011.

²⁶ Ibid.

*...making revolution is not something new for Egyptians—having had no less than three “official” revolutions in the modern era: the 1881 Urabi Revolution which overthrew a corrupt and comprador royalty; the 1919 Revolution, which nearly brought down British military rule; and the 1952 Revolution which inaugurated 60 years of military dictatorships under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak... In other words, despite what commentators might say, modern Egyptians have never passively accepted the failed colonial or postcolonial states that fate has dealt them.*²⁷

The contemporary Arab revolts did not wake the region from an eternal slumber of Oriental Despotism,²⁸ but the salient display of mass agency **did** stimulate and reinforce the conception of the popular masses as a collective actor. People were not only conscious agents, they became conscious of their agency as a people. For example, Muhammad Salah, an elderly leftist leader, claimed that:

*The Egyptian revolution transformed the science of revolution in the whole world... What happened in this revolution proved that so-called Egyptian culture and our religious background are not the determinants of the Egyptian society. The revolution showed this. The historical Egyptian culture is not the one that was built since the pharaohs... it was the one we saw in Tahrir Square. The revolution destroyed the mystification of our culture and showed that this perceived culture was untrue – the relation between man and woman, between religion and politics, and so on.*²⁹

The Arab revolts, renewed forms of militant trade union activism,³⁰ and movements such as the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street, might be the harbingers of a “resurgence of the Subject” – in its “grand” sense of people collectively shaping their destinies by transforming their societies.

However, are the “subaltern” groups today sufficiently equipped with critical theories that enable the development of a concept of themselves as a coherent, collective and revolutionary actor? Since the last four decades, critical thought has shunned away from the construction of “grand” Subjects, which have been tainted with the “modernist” legacy of authoritarianism, eschatologism,

²⁷ Colla 2011a.

²⁸ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2011.

²⁹ Interview with Muhammad Salah, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

³⁰ See, e.g., Mathers 2007; Moore 2011.

determinism, and/or “monologism”³¹. The subaltern was intellectually emancipated from its subsumption under “unitary Subjects” and motors of history, and emerged as a multi-vocal complex of identities.³² But how did the conceptual fragmentation of domination and subalternity emancipate the subaltern groups from their economic and political predicaments?³³ How did the recognition of the decentralized and dispersed character of “capillary power”³⁴ and “everyday”, “molecular” or “invisible” forms of resistance³⁵ develop the means for these groups to overcome the conditions of capitalism?³⁶ Post-structuralist, deconstructivist,³⁷ and post-modernist schools of thought have presented themselves as the defeat of the grand Hegelian and Marxist narratives, but were they not grand narratives of defeat themselves?³⁸

Rather than an emancipatory breakthrough, the embrace of localized micro-strategies of resistance by activists and engaged social scientists alike appears as a practical and theoretical retreat from the triumph of neoliberal capitalism.³⁹ The essentialism of the universal was replaced by the fragmentation of the particular,⁴⁰ and the critique of social forms by the genealogies and the deconstructions of their concepts.⁴¹

³¹ “Monologism” encourages one “voice” to speak, thus generating homogeneity and claims for an “ultimate truth”. Conversely, “dialogism” offers a platform to many “voices”, thereby stimulating difference, variation, and a relative conception of truth. See Bakhtin 1985.

³² See Mouffe 1993.

³³ Harman 2002.

³⁴ See Foucault 1972. The notion of “capillary power” was hardly original or anti-Marxist: For example, Gramsci had already elaborated such forms of “self-domination” through his concept of hegemony. (Morton 2007: 93)

³⁵ See Scott 1985.

³⁶ Moore 2011: 8.

³⁷ The alternation of binary, hierarchical oppositions in the text/contexts. See Derrida 1978.

³⁸ *“The location of identity in culture or ideology rather than in material relations of political struggle reflects, not only the defeat and decline of the labour movement, but also of social movements based upon gender and race, to which they are historically and politically connected.”* (Moore 2011: 20).

³⁹ *“Local actors, knowledge and interventions are key features in both ‘new’ Right and ‘new’ Left conceptualisations of development.”* (Mohan and Stokke 2000: 249)

⁴⁰ See, e.g., the replacement of the term “classes” by “social actors” in the second edition of Richards’ and Waterbury’s *A Political Economy of the Middle East*: *“‘Social actors’ is an amorphous term... Its main task in this context is to avoid asking: Are there structural contradictions in capitalist economies, and in whose interests are such economies most likely to operate?”* (Beinin 1999: 22)

⁴¹ Moore 2011: 14-5.

I argue that “grand” obstacles for human emancipation, such as global capitalism, require “grand” solutions: i.e. the (re)construction of coherent⁴² and multidimensional mass Subjects. The intellectual challenge of the 21st century consists of a theoretical negation of the negation: how to preserve the post-structural, deconstructivist, and post-modernist dismantlement of the grand narratives,⁴³ **and**, at the same time, engage in the construction of new, emancipatory conceptions of the Subject?⁴⁴

This dissertation aims to be a modest contribution to the re-construction of such a theory of the Subject. It is not an ambitious attempt to build a new, grand narrative *ex nihilo*, but it constitutes one of the many participations in a historical and still ongoing “collaborative Project” that reaches back to the first defenders of the principle of self-emancipation.

Research Questions

The central problematic of this dissertation – the contradiction between the principle of self-determination and the historical division of labor, or, in other words, the separation between “masses” and “intellectuals” – is not a wholly personal and “external” frame imposed on my object of research, but it expresses a real, living, and pertinent discussion among Egyptian social and political actors. First the Mahalla movement, then the mass strikes of the 25 January Revolution, saliently (re)introduced the working class as a social force and collective actor in contemporary Egyptian politics. These events directed my attention to Egypt as a case study of the role of non-proletarian actors in the development of the workers’ movement. Since 2008 I began to develop a theory of the Subject that

⁴² Note that *coherence* is not the same as *homogeneity*: coherence denotes the internal consistency, unity, and systematicity of a phenomenon, whereas homogeneity emphasizes “sameness” and “identity”. Coherence is the opposite of fragmentation, whereas the opposite of homogeneity is heterogeneity. For example, a group can be fairly homogeneous, but fragmented, or heterogeneous yet coherent. Furthermore, coherence is not an *a priori* quality of social Subjects, but has to be actively constructed.

⁴³ Some of which had been already anticipated by Marx and other “modernist” critical thinkers: “What is called historical evolution depends in general on the fact that the latest form regards earlier ones as stages in the development of itself and conceives them always in a one-sided manner, since only rarely and under quite special conditions is a society able to adopt a critical attitude towards itself.” (Marx 1971 [MIA])

⁴⁴ In fact, this proposal is hardly original, as, for example, the masses in Egypt themselves have already initiated such a project “from below” via the spontaneous and everyday concept of *al-sha’b* – “the people”.

allowed me to investigate and conceptualize this intervention. I explain this Subject-centered methodology in detail in the first part of the dissertation.

Specific research questions were developed alongside my methodological framework. In fact, when I browse through my fieldwork notebooks, I can retrace the gradual accumulation of reciprocal fieldwork-induced theoretical contemplation and theory-induced fieldwork. A step by step elaboration of this practico-theoretical trajectory would probably constitute a thesis – and an exercise in autobiographical narcissism – in itself. Here it suffices to say that, after some time of engagement with the subject matter, the following research questions emerged:

- ❖ In what ways do non-proletarian actors support the struggles of workers? What are the *types* of assistance?
- ❖ In what ways do non-proletarian actors support the development of the workers' movement? Which forms of assistance actually *develop* the workers as a social Subject? I.e. what are the *modes* of assistance?
- ❖ How are non-proletarian actors drawn to the workers' movement? What is the position of the "Left"?
- ❖ In what ways does assistance create shared systems of activity? Does the workers' movement reciprocally transform its "assistants"? (How) Are the educators educated?
- ❖ What are the ethico-political motivations and consequences of assistance?
- ❖ What is the position and role of the workers' movement within a broader subaltern counter-hegemonic bloc? How does the workers' movement assist subaltern groups to emancipate themselves? Should workers assist non-proletarian activists in "their" political revolution, or should political activists support workers in "their" social revolution? How can a collaborative subaltern Project be established?
- ❖ What is the history of the worker Subject and the "Left" in Egypt? What are the historical types and modes of assistance towards the workers' movement?
- ❖ What is the relation between the particular (Egyptian) and general (global) development of capitalism, and the formation of an Egyptian working class? How did the struggles of the "Prince" constitute the "Pharaoh", and vice versa?

In the text, these research questions are developed in three broad phases, which, in my opinion, reflect the three conceptual moments of a critical political science. Firstly, in *Part I Methodology*, I elaborate a *general* theory of the worker Subject that

allows me to understand the *particular* trajectory of the Egyptian workers' movement. This part is an exercise in political philosophy and as such it mobilizes philosophers (in the broad sense) rather than social scientists (in the narrow sense). Each methodology has its own vocabulary, and in order to differentiate my specific methodological concepts – Subject, Project, State, et cetera – from their common, everyday usage, I have chosen to capitalize these terms. Perhaps, to some readers, this capitalization conjures the ominous specter of the grand old Subjects, which have been put to the grave a long time ago. I stress, however, that the content of these concepts has been systematically re-appropriated as tools for collective emancipation. The workers' movement is not a mystical motor of history, but a potentially emancipatory Project that has to be constructed through human agency.

Secondly, in *Part II Development of the Workers' Movement*, I narrate the historical development of capitalism and a modern working class in Egypt. Colonialism, the uneven and combined development of capitalism, Nasserism, the emergence of a rentier economy, et cetera, created a peculiar trajectory for the Egyptian working class and the Left. This historical narrative is mostly based on the existing historical literature. It does not aspire to reinvent the history of the Egyptian workers' movement, nor to discuss in detail its various academic interpretations,⁴⁵ but it aims to construct an emancipatory narrative *from the perspective of the development of the working class as a Subject*, based on the specific methodological framework that I advanced in the previous part.

In *Part III Against the Pharaoh*, I enter the twilight zone between history and actuality. The voices of my fieldwork become stronger, and primary and secondary sources are more or less in balance. Historians slowly make way for political scientists. Whereas *Part II Development of the Workers' Movement* sets the stage for the general-historical predicament of the Egyptian workers' movement and the Left, *Part III Against the Pharaoh* discusses the recent transformations of both the "Pharaoh" and the "Prince" – anticipating the two case studies at hand. This ends the historical moment of the dissertation.

⁴⁵ Obviously some of the crucial discussions are present – but mostly in the "humble" form of footnotes, which do not burden the main thrust of the narrative.

Thirdly, I engage with two case studies, predominantly drawing upon primary sources, especially interviews,⁴⁶ which are completed with recent academic and journalistic publications. My original case study was the workers' movement of Mahalla al-Kubra – elaborated in *Part IV The Mahalla Strike Movement* – and this remained the focus of my research until the 25 January Revolution of 2011. The revolution saliently imposed an expansion of my research. (Many times my respondents grinned and said that after their revolution, I had to write a whole new chapter in my dissertation – and right they were, seeing that the 25 January Revolution takes up more than one fifth of the total page count of the text) As the revolutionary process is all but finished at the moment of writing, *Part V The 25 January Revolution* part is inevitably incomplete as well.

Lastly, the dissertation is concluded with an *Epilogue*, which contains three brief chapters: *The Prince and the Pharaoh* constitutes a summary of my research findings; *A CHAT with Gramsci* contemplates the theoretical implications of my study; and *A Self-Reflecting Note* reflects the central problematic of my thesis back towards myself – what kind of assistance did I, as a researcher, offer the Egyptian Left and workers' movement?

Practicalities

Language

The dissertation is written in American English. Citations and quotes are always rendered as they originally appeared in the sources.

I have chosen for a popularizing transcription of Arab names, places, and terms, as this seems the habit within most political sciences and area studies journals of the region. Preference is given to the Egyptian colloquial forms of names and organizations (e.g. *gama'a* instead of *jama'a*). The definite article “al” is always written “al” and never “el”; this applies to the bibliography as well, in order to preserve systematicity and prevent confusion. Arab and other non-English words are written in italics.

Numbers up until twenty are written in full, from 21 on they are written numerically (e.g. three workers vs. 300 workers – but 3.3 percent of the workers). Dates are written 25 January 2011 (never January 25, or January 25th).

⁴⁶ I discuss my interview methodology in the introduction to the *Appendix*.

I often use the active voice – e.g. “As I discussed before” instead of “As discussed before” – because I dislike the grammatical “trick” of eliding the *formal* presence of the author from the text in order to create a semblance of “objectivity” in *content*. The text does not become more truthful or critical by pretending that it has written itself, on the contrary: it is vital to remind you, the reader, that it is not the voice of objective reality, but my particular, subjective voice that speaks through the text.

References

With regard to references, I opted for an author–date system in footnotes. This has the advantage of presenting a quick shortcut to the full bibliographical address, while it does not obstruct a fluid reading of the text. I have also used the author-date system for internet sources. The annotation [MIA] refers to the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org) Citations and quotes are directly inserted in the text, unless they count 50 or more words; then they are rendered as a separate paragraph.

PART I

Methodology

Introduction

The revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia invite us to consider the question of the relationship between subjectivities, on one hand, and political agency and collective action, on the other. In both revolutions the people formed a sa collective agent asserting a collective will and putting forward demands for radical transformation. The people, as a collective actor, engaged in sustained protests, formulated unified demands, and developed a shared discourse that affirmed the will to bring about specific changes. How did this collectivity come about?

Salwa Ismail (2011: 990)

A Methodology of Emancipation

The sudden appearance of forms of mass, collective, and popular agency during and after the so-called Arab Spring revealed the partiality and inadequacy of a dominant Middle East Studies paradigm that sought to explain the “persistent” reproduction of authoritarianism and backwardness in the region in terms of the political passivity or cultural predisposition of the population.⁴⁷ To a large extent this is the logical outcome of a methodology that conceives of the population primarily as the Object of regime policies or deeply rooted cultural patterns. I argue that to understand the development and mobilization of mass agency the researcher of the “Arab Spring” needs a concept of populations as potentially coherent ensembles – as Subjects.

However, as I pointed out in the *Prologue* – apart from (or because of?) lingering Marxist narratives – the theory of the collective Subject has been largely discredited by post-structuralist, deconstructivist, and post-modernist critical thought. Meanwhile, from the 1970s onwards, there has been a revival of liberal “bourgeois” perspectives on social Subjects in the form of Social Movement Theory (SMT). Within the social sciences there has been a tradition that takes “social movements” as its subject matter since the 1930s. Ironically, the interest within Western academia for mass agency largely grew out of fear of the threat that socialist and fascist street mobilization posed to bourgeois democracy. Social movements were negatively perceived as forms of non-institutionalized, irrational, and spontaneous collective behavior, in which agency was largely

⁴⁷ Beinín and Vairel 2011: 1 ; also see the *mea culpa* of Tarek Masoud (2011) and Jeremy Kinsman (2011).

absent.⁴⁸ The emergence of the “new social movements” in the 1960s necessitated novel perspectives on the formative causes and developmental dynamics of collective action. Contemporary SMT took form around the “resource mobilization” model, which studies the effectiveness whereby organizations use resources and opportunities to accomplish their goals. Political process theory (PPT) became the dominant paradigm within SMT. Yet, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison claimed that: “*There is something fundamental missing from the sociology of social movements, something that falls between the categories of the various schools and is left out of their various conceptualizations.*”⁴⁹

SMT and the PPT model in particular have been increasingly criticized because of their rigid categories, their reliance on (variations of) rational choice theory, and their lack of appreciation for the role of culture,⁵⁰ learning, and consciousness in shaping social movements.⁵¹ Since the 1980s, the “concession” of SMT scholars towards the role of the “cultural”, the “ideological”, and the “pedagogical” in shaping social movements has been its engagement with symbolic interactionism and frame theory.⁵² Authors such as Charles Tilly, Alain Touraine, and Alberto Melucci expanded the classic model of resource mobilization with attention to the role of socialization, inter-personal networks, tactical decision-making, and historical and cultural context in the formation of social movements.

However, frame theory has been criticized for being an apolitical, fragmentary, and superficial conception of how thoughts and artifacts mediate collective agency. It is a “...marketing approach to movement mobilization...”⁵³ that “...arises precisely when marketing processes have come to dominate social movements...”⁵⁴ Especially the development of self-conscious, coherent practices of collective activity – i.e. the *subjective* component of social movements – remained a black box. With regard to the worker protests as social movements, Paul Johnston argued that:

⁴⁸ Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 10-11.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 45.

⁵⁰ “*The recognition that culture plays a central role in generating and sustaining movements was slow to develop and remains the model’s least developed concept.*” (Morris 2000: 446)

⁵¹ See Goodwin and Jasper 2004.

⁵² Johnston 2009: 3.

⁵³ Oliver and Johnston 2000: 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

*No social movement can thrive without a shared self-understanding: a common vocabulary of meaning and action; shared questions; a collective learning process; and clear, common, and useful ideas that resonate among our ranks about what is wrong, what we want to do about it, and what part our movement has played and can play in making history... To the extent that we are engaged in an open and tolerant dialogue that explores answers to these questions, the new labor movement can become not only a movement in itself, but also a movement for itself. This is an old agenda, to be sure, but it is time to try again.*⁵⁵

Johnston's reflections represented an attempt to conceptualize the workers' movement as an immanent Subject: as a collective actor who develops self-determination and self-consciousness from the process of its own struggles against domination and exploitation.⁵⁶

In general, SMT lacks a critical and political understanding of the position of its methodology and its research project within the intellectual reproduction of the capitalist social formation. Its crystallization as a coherent school of thought from the 1970s onwards coincided with the collapse of the traditional social movements – especially the workers' movement – and the consolidation of neoliberal global capitalism.⁵⁷ It is a theory from the perspective of "society" towards social movements as objects of study, instead of a theory that places itself within the perspective of the Subject towards "society".⁵⁸ In his research on European protest waves against neoliberalism, Andy Mathers asserted that: *"...what is required is a 'theory against society' which analyzes the resistance to these forms of domination through a critical process so as to produce critical knowledge and liberatory theory which can assist in bringing about social change."*⁵⁹

In order to understand the workers' movement as an actor able "to bring about social change", a methodology is needed that elaborates a critical conception of: (1) collective agency; (2) development; (3) modes and types of assistance; (4) the relation between theory and practice; (5) the relation between the researcher and his object of study. In this part of the text I construct the outlines of such a methodology, which is rooted in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Andy

⁵⁵ Johnston 2001: 27.

⁵⁶ I explore this line of thought in detail in the following chapters.

⁵⁷ Mathers 2007.

⁵⁸ "Social movements are rather comprehensible as dynamic social forms that arise and develop with the process of crisis and restructuring of the capital relation." (Ibid. 26)

⁵⁹ Ibid. 38.

Blunden's concept of "collaborative Project", and the writings of "traditional" authors such as Marx, Lukács, Gramsci, and Luxemburg.

A Need to CHAT

Operating within the SMT tradition, Eyerman and Jamison tentatively explored social movements as "processes in formation" and "forms of activity" with a "cognitive praxis".⁶⁰ These three notions point towards a specific perspective on social movements. Firstly, as "movements", they not only imply a quantitative "crossing of distance" or "being in motion", but also an internal **development** from a certain phase, level or state towards another one. Through a struggle to change the status quo, social movements (and their participants) are themselves transformed. Secondly, they are specific forms of social **activity**, of people "coming together" and "doing things". Thirdly, social movements are sites of **learning**, of the formation of consciousness and the production of knowledge.

The concepts of "activity" and "learning" have been thoroughly developed outside SMT by scholars operating in the tradition of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), an interdisciplinary school of thought that combines insights from Vygotsky's cultural psychology and Leontyev's activity theory. Despite its interdisciplinary ambitions and potential applicability to the study of social movements, its historical roots in the domains of psychology, pedagogy and cultural anthropology have prevented CHAT from being used extensively in studies of collective forms of protest. Nevertheless, CHAT holds great promise for an understanding of the organization and mobilization of political and social protests and the workers' movement in particular.⁶¹

In his 2010 book *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity*, Andy Blunden offered a concrete framework for an emancipatory social science based on the interdisciplinary concept of human activity. His work was a friendly critique of CHAT, and it reconstructed the historical antecedents, the philosophical premises, and the scientific frames of a scientific methodology that is not committed to the description, prediction and control of the behavior of populations, but to an understanding and reinforcement of processes of self-emancipation. Blunden's methodology is rooted in the tradition of "Romantic

⁶⁰ Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 2-3.

⁶¹ See De Smet 2012.

Science” – pioneered by figures such as Goethe and Herder – in Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectic, in the Vygotsky school of Soviet cultural psychology, and in contemporary Activity Theory. As a methodology of human agency it treats its subject matter not as a passive Object, from which knowledge is unilaterally derived, but as an active Subject. Blunden’s writings have had a great influence on the formation of my methodology as they offer a lucid framework that puts collective agency at the heart of scientific analysis. Especially by pairing the insights I derived from his discussions of Hegel and Vygotsky to my personal understanding of Marx’s and Gramsci’s ideas,⁶² I have been able to develop, enrich and push forward some of the theoretical intuitions I gained during the past years.

Overview

In *Development*, I engage with the notions of development, subject matter, unit of analysis, and Project. In order to tackle the methodological problem of scientific

⁶² I have been reading Marx since I was a teenager. As most youthful enthusiasts I started with the Communist Manifesto, which appeared alien in its use of arcane language and obscure categories. I was only able to comprehend the text on a basic linguistic level and not conceptually. I remember, for example, how I rebuked its call to “confiscate the property of all immigrants” as this seemed to agree with the discourse of the emerging extreme right in Flanders at the time. My attempt to read Capital for the first time failed utterly, as I had not developed in the slightest a framework of even bourgeois economics to understand Marx’s critique. However, throughout the years I endured my readings – not only via the vulgarizations of Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and their interpretations, which acted as forms of textual mediation, but also by continuously re-engaging with Marx’s texts themselves, discovering new meanings and developing deeper levels of understanding. Taking the advice of Lenin in his *Philosophical Notebooks* to heart, my latest readings of Marx have been strongly mediated by Hegel, whose concept of the dialectic I am finally beginning to understand on a level that transcends the platitudes of “relationality”, “holism”, and “everything flows”.

My reading of Gramsci started in my second year of university and took as its intuitive framework my developing understanding of the Marxist “classics”. As such, it was – unlike the readings by most of my fellow students – neither a pristine encounter, nor a perspective overdetermined by the reformist, Eurocommunist, and bourgeois interpretations of the Italian Marxist’s legacy. For me, Gramsci had always been first and foremost a revolutionary Marxist, whose writings constituted an immanent critique of the theory and practice of “Second Internationalism” and the traditions of Italian Marxism. The fragmented, non-linear and “thick” character of Gramsci’s main corpus – the notebooks he wrote in prison – has turned the interpretation of his ideas into a work of scholarly historical-textual analysis. Therefore I have grounded my own reading in the critical frameworks offered by authors such as Adam D. Morton (2007) and especially Peter D. Thomas (2010).

categorization, I follow an intellectual thread beginning from “Romantic Science”, over Hegel and Marx, to Vygotsky and Blunden.

The second chapter, *Activity and Subjectivity*, advances an understanding of the nature of the “domain” of the social sciences as human activity (praxis) and Subjectivity. The dichotomy between methodological individualism and collectivism is sublated within the concept of “Subject”. Human agency is broken down as a developmental process: as the acquisition of Subjectness. “Everyday resistance” and “mass protests” are integrated as moments within trajectories of struggle.

Learning and Instruction discusses the “pedagogical” mechanisms of Subject development through the Vygotskian concepts of interiorization and zone of proximal development. I augment these ontogenetic notions with Gramsci’s sociogenetic insights of the role of intellectuals in the process of class formation. Subsequently, I explore different modes of assistance in the development of class sociogenesis via Blunden’s appropriation of Hegel’s “theory of recognition”. This brings me to a discussion of Gramsci’s concepts of “dialectical pedagogy” and “philosophy of praxis”, which is cross-fertilized with Vygotsky’s understanding of “true concepts”.

Armed with the methodological categories from the previous three chapters, in *Proletarian Sociogenesis* I give an archetypical outline of the development of the workers’ movement. Firstly, I defend an emergentist conception of class formation. Secondly, I move that “the Strike” is the unit of analysis of the workers’ movement. I connect the trajectory to Marx’s understanding of emancipation, Gramsci’s political theory, and Luxemburg’s notion of the Mass Strike.

After completing this “logical” trajectory, I turn my attention to the “historical” development of the Egyptian workers’ movement in the second part of the dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

Development

...all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence...

Karl Marx, *Capital*. Volume 3 (1991: 956)

Romantic Science

Andy Blunden argued that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the pioneer of “Romantic Science”, a trend of thought rather than a discipline, which criticized the methodology of positivism.⁶³ Goethe saw science as a dynamic practice rather than a static body of knowledge. He formulated a critique of both inductive empiricism and deductive rationalism by emphasizing the organic connection between the “whole” and its “parts”, investigating “...how to form a concept of a complex process in such a way as to allow you to understand it as a whole, from which all the parts can be understood.”⁶⁴ Characterizing a process by means of a common attribute, or as a collection of phenomena sharing some feature offers only a descriptive “pseudoconcept” of the whole.⁶⁵ The Romantic scientist aimed to conceive of a phenomenon as a *Gestalt* or coherent whole of shapes. Yet, the *Gestalt* was always but a moment in a developmental process. A full understanding of the phenomenon required an investigation or reconstruction in thought of its *Bildung*: the maturation or development towards its current form. Really knowing something not only involved an insight in its current shape, but in its whole developmental process.

Because, as a dynamic whole of interwoven parts, a *Gestalt* was a complex thing, the Romantic scientist had to discern a suitable and relevant unit from where to begin the process of reconstruction: the *Urphänomen* or the archetype of the phenomenon. Blunden explained that the *Urphänomen* is “...itself a

⁶³ Blunden 2010. I only summarize those main outlines of Goethe’s theoretical outlook which are relevant for this presentation.

⁶⁴ Blunden 2012. I am grateful of Andy Blunden for letting me get hold of his new book on Concepts before it went to print.

⁶⁵ For example, one can describe all features of a house – roof, walls, furniture, et cetera – but then “house” remains a collection of phenomena; a real *concept* of a house is, e.g., “a place for people to live in”.

phenomenon, but it had to be the most easily understood, simplest, or archetypal form of the thing, a form which allowed the nature of the whole phenomenon to be understood."⁶⁶ Instead of imposing an external and arbitrary category upon the object of investigation, the Romantic Scientist started his analysis from the phenomenon itself, but in its *logically* – as opposed to genetically or historically – most primitive form. This methodology brought Goethe to speculate about the existence of the biological cell as the *Urphänomen* of organic life, which carried in itself the *Gestalt* of the developed being in an embryonic form – an intuition that was later vindicated by the actual discovery of the cell through microscopic research. Goethe's methodological intuitions were further developed by Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, who were directly influenced by his notions of Romantic Science.⁶⁷

Immanent Critique

Hegel developed Goethe's intuitions into a complete system.⁶⁸ Unlike Goethe, Hegel was little interested in matters of natural history, but he aspired to understand the development of human society. Hegel set out to criticize the four Western historical forms of human cognition: metaphysical; empirical; critical (Kantian); and intuitive. Hegel developed Kant's resurrection of the Greek philosophical tradition of "dialectical logic"⁶⁹ as a tool to overcome the dichotomy between Subject and Object.⁷⁰

Like Goethe, Hegel did not start from society's "parts", the individuals, but from the "whole", as a *Gestalt* or a "formation of consciousness". Even though human beings created societies, from the perspective of a particular person, shared forms of life precede and constitute his or her own individual existence. Hegel's notion of a *Gestalt* was: "...a dissonant unity of a *way of thought, a way of life and a certain constellation of material culture.*"⁷¹ This is simply how people

⁶⁶ Blunden 2010: 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 31.

⁶⁸ Hegel's philosophy has been the object of much scholarly debate and spawned a variety of interpretations. I do not wish to burden the presentation of my research with these exegetic discussions; instead I only highlight those insights and interpretations that I personally find useful and relevant for an understanding of the subject matter at hand.

⁶⁹ For example, in the shape of Socrates' dialogue, which differed from a "debate" in the sense that its participants did not try to fix their particular opinion as the "true" or "right" one, but by the continuous mutual negation of their arguments they developed a higher level of thought.

⁷⁰ Levine 2006: 162. Also see *Chapter 2 Activity and Subjectivity*.

⁷¹ Blunden 2010: 47. Emphasis in original.

shape themselves into a whole: as a complex of thought-forms, practical activities, and material artifacts. Understanding a formation of consciousness was accomplished by an immanent⁷² critique: a skeptical investigation of the phenomenon from “within” and in/on its own terms. Like Goethe, Hegel suggested that the philosopher could discern one element within a specific formation of consciousness, which allowed him or her to understand the whole *Gestalt*, and which objectively constituted the process as a *Gestalt*. Hegel’s interpretation of the *Urphänomen* was the Concept.⁷³ A formation of consciousness could be comprehended through a logical, immanent critique of a simple, undeveloped “abstract” concept into a complex, multisided “concrete” notion. With “concreteness” Hegel did not mean “real” or “material”, but “...*mature, developed, having many nuances and connections with other concepts, rich in content.*”⁷⁴

Marxist Dialectic

Demystification

In his later works, Hegel fully embraced philosophical idealism.⁷⁵ The Young Hegelians turned their master’s idealism to political purposes, but whereas Feuerbach’s materialism rejected Hegel’s dialectic altogether, Marx developed an immanent critique of his philosophy, working out its contradictions according to a “...*consistent naturalism or humanism.*...”⁷⁶

For Hegel, alienation did not take place in the sensuous world by inhuman practices such as exploitation and domination, but was due to the fact that humanity “...*objectifies itself in distinction from and in opposition to abstract thought.*”⁷⁷ Alienation in the social world was only an appearance of the estrangement of man from pure thought. Hegel reduced the substance of humanity to thought and turned human sensuousness, labor and artifacts into attributes of the abstract mind and self-consciousness. Marx re-appropriated

⁷² “Immanent” means belonging or inherent to the phenomenon itself. The term “immanent critique” was in fact coined by Lukács, a century later than Hegel’s use of “critique”, but it describes his method more accurately. (Ibid. 120)

⁷³ Ibid. 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 62.

⁷⁵ Marx 1992: 385.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 389.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 384. Emphasis in original.

self-consciousness and the mind as forms of an integral humanity whose nature comprised both “ideal” and “material” dimensions. He inverted Hegel’s understanding of alienation, and claimed that alienation in thought was but the appearance of estrangement in social reality. Idealist reductionism had mystified and concealed the potential for an emancipatory criticism of Hegel’s philosophy. Marx then concluded that there were two forms of the dialectic, a mystified and a rational one:

*In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify what exists. In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient nature as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.*⁷⁸

Marx’s method was not Hegel’s dialectic minus its mystical form, but precisely *the process of demystification* via immanent critique: “Hegel’s dialectic is the basic form of all dialectics, but only **after** being stripped of its mystical form, and it is precisely this which distinguishes **my** method.”⁷⁹ The “young” Marx reconnected Hegel’s method to social reality, and formulated a criticism of the “autonomous” discipline of philosophy from the standpoint of society.

Marx emphasized that, whereas thought appropriates its object *logically* or *conceptually*, the object itself is produced *historically*, i.e. as the product of human activity.⁸⁰ The movement of the world is not a derivative of the development of thought, springing from the head of the philosopher as the goddess Athena, and neither is the real, historical production of the subject matter mechanistically and directly “reflected” in the thought process. Rather, the apprehension of a phenomenon in thought is always conceptually mediated.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Marx 1990: 103.

⁷⁹ Marx and Engels 1982: 187. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ Blunden 2010: 105-6; Levine 2006: 47-8; Lukács 2000: 110.

⁸¹ In a way, the difference between the movement of the subject matter and the development of understanding of the object reminded me of the Russian formalists’ distinction in the literary field between **plot** (or narrative, fabula) and **story** (or syuzhet). If a film or novel, the chain of events and scenes which the audience or reader experiences, i.e. the story, does not directly correspond to the logical pattern of the whole, i.e. the plot. A story may entail a flashback

The Cell-Form

In the Afterword to the Second Edition of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx distinguished between the mode of presentation or exposition and that of inquiry or investigation:

*Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we had before us an **a priori** construction.*⁸²

When Marx wrote *Capital*, he aimed to apprehend in thought the ensemble of capitalist relations that historically emerged in his time. *Capital* was Marx's mode of presentation: a logical sequence of conceptual categories and their negations.⁸³ This exposition was the outcome of an extended process of investigation – a *longue durée* of contemplation of the concepts of political economy. This inquiry led him to start his exposition not from the complex capital relation, but from the most simple political-economic concept: the commodity relation.⁸⁴ Similar to Goethe's *Urphänomen*, and Hegel's Concept, Marx argued that a social formation or ensemble of relations could be best understood through a conceptual development of its **cell-form**. For the *Philosophy of Right*, the concept of private property had been the cell-form, for *Capital*, this became the commodity relation:⁸⁵ *"The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity."*⁸⁶

(analepsis) or a flashforward (prolepsis) as dramatic devices, whereas the plot presents the events in their logico-chronological order. In the film *Memento* (2000), for example, the plot even represents the opposite movement of the story. The question is not whether the story or the plot is the "true" shape of the movie. The viewer needs a concept of the story – which is mediated by a reconstruction of the plot – to make sense of and appreciate the movement of the story. Even films or novels which present themselves as a dream-like sequence or a free association of thoughts, will encourage their interpreters to grasp for a plot or "meaning" if they do not want to merely passively *experience* the story, but actively *understand* it.

⁸² Marx 1990: 192. Emphasis in original.

⁸³ Levine 2006: 48.

⁸⁴ Bakhurst 2007: 58.

⁸⁵ Blunden 2010: 66; 108-12.

⁸⁶ Marx 1990: 125.

Marx had already elaborated upon his method in the *Grundrisse*. Firstly, the social scientist starts from "...a chaotic conception of the whole..."⁸⁷, i.e. the direct appearance of the subject matter, which is already concrete in social reality but still abstract in thought. Marx gave the example of the "population", which: "...appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception."⁸⁸ Subsequently, the object should be studied in detail; the phenomenon is disassembled "...by means of further determination, [moving] analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until [arriving] at the simplest determinations..."⁸⁹. The phase of investigation entails the process of gathering empirical data and of abstraction (generalization). The end point of the "descending movement" of abstraction was the cell-form of a phenomenon.⁹⁰

Once the cell-form had been established, the ascending movement began, in which the subject matter was conceptually "reconstructed", moving from the abstract to the concrete: "From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations."⁹¹ The "ascending movement" ends in a conception of the *Gestalt*, the "totality", or "multi-determinateness" of a phenomenon.⁹² Whereas the mode of enquiry produces the cell-form of a phenomenon, the mode of presentation rebuilds a concrete understanding of the phenomenon from the Concept. Again, the conceptual development of the concrete social formation out of the cell-form did not (necessarily)⁹³ reflect a historical movement. Instead, the more complex forms

⁸⁷ Marx 1973: 101.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Levine 2006: 45.

⁹¹ Marx 1973: 101.

⁹² Levine 2006: 45.

⁹³ However, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx noted that: "...the simple categories are the expressions of relations within which the less developed concrete may have already realized itself before having posited the more many-sided connection or relation which is mentally expressed in the more concrete category; while the more developed concrete preserves the same category as a subordinate relation. Money may exist, and did exist historically, before capital existed, before banks existed, before wage labour existed, etc. Thus in this respect it may be said that the simpler category can express the dominant relations of a less developed whole, or else those subordinate relations of a more developed whole which already had a historic existence before this whole developed in the direction expressed by a more concrete category. **To that extent the**

such as money, labor, rent, capital, production, distribution, et cetera, were developed *logically* from the simple commodity relation – evidently supported by the historical data that Marx’s economic investigations had produced: “We perceive straight away the insufficiency of the simple form of value: *it is an embryonic form which must undergo a series of metamorphoses before it can ripen into the price-form.*”⁹⁴ Through the exposition of the *Bildung* or conceptual development of the commodity relation, i.e. the process of commodification, the originally amorphous appearance of bourgeois society was rendered concrete as the capitalist social formation.

Marx never elaborated his methodology in a systematic way. His notions of social formation and cell-form, for example, are deployed without much ado. Moreover, after he was done criticizing Hegel, he mobilized his methods principally for a critique of political economy, and not for an analysis of class struggle. However, his methodology was appropriated and enriched by the Vygotsky school of cultural psychology, which, despite its focus on ontogenesis,⁹⁵ produced new methodological tools to investigate the working class in a dialectical way.

Soviet Cultural Psychology

Social Situation of Development

Soviet Cultural Psychology grew out of Lev Vygotsky’s immanent critique of behaviorism and reflexology, which were at that time the dominant psychological disciplines in Russia and which rejected consciousness as a valid object of research. Even though evidence that Vygotsky was directly influenced by Hegel is, at best, tenuous, his methodology was formed through a profound engagement with Marx’s “early” writings, *Capital*, Engels’s popularizations, and Lenin’s philosophical notebooks, which, for their part, constituted a materialist critique of Hegelianism.⁹⁶

path of abstract thought, rising from the simple to the combined, would correspond to the real historical process.” (Marx 1973: 101-2. My emphasis.)

⁹⁴ Marx 1990: 154. My emphasis.

⁹⁵ The development of a human as a singular biological and psychological organism.

⁹⁶ Blunden 2010: 122-6.

Vygotsky's object of study was human behavior and consciousness, which he approached as a *Gestalt*, a whole of interconnected parts.⁹⁷ Human speech, memory, perception, et cetera, do not develop independently from each other, but their formation is intertwined. Their individual function can only be understood through their connection to each other and to the whole of which they are a part.⁹⁸ Moreover, human ontogenesis could only be comprehended as the outcome of a development process, as *Bildung*, which necessitated: "...a reconstruction of each stage in the development of the process: the process must be turned back to its initial stages."⁹⁹

Like other and 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 his conception of the relation between the child and its social situation of development (SSoD) as a **predicament** from which the child has to emancipate itself. The child can only liberate itself from the restraints of its SSoD 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..."¹⁰⁰

The social environment does not offer new psychological structures and forms of mediation on a plate; on the contrary, the child has to create those mental functions, **neoformations**, which allow it to make a qualitative development that overcomes its restrictive condition. The child's SSoD 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 its current SSoD, and, on the other, the constraints of its condition, is the motor behind the creation of new psychological functions and mental development as a whole. 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. Major transition points are defined in terms of a revolution in

⁹⁷ Vygotsky's cultural psychology should, however, not be confused with *Gestalt* psychology, in which "the mind" – rather than culturally mediated action – remains the primary unit of analysis.

⁹⁸ Blunden 2010: 153.

⁹⁹ Vygotsky 1978: 62.

¹⁰⁰ Blunden 2010: 154.

the forms of mediation of the child, which enable new modes of interaction between the child and its social environment.¹⁰¹ Vygotsky observed that for each stage of development, one neoformation and “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.¹⁰² Development then appears as a series of succeeding *Gestalten* that render the child as a person more and more “concrete” – in the Hegelian sense.

To be clear: my appraisal of Vygotsky’s system of thought is **not** an invitation to simply transpose an ontogenetic developmental scheme onto the process of proletarian sociogenesis¹⁰³. Obviously the maturation of the psychological functions of a child is of a different order than the development of a workers’ movement. My methodological proposal is **not** a reduction of “the social” to the “psychological”. On the contrary: what is interesting about Vygotsky’s approach is his negation of traditional psychology; how he appropriated the Marxist dialectic – which was originally “developed” for a conceptual understanding of *social* forms – for the study of ontogenesis; how he connected ontogenesis to processes of sociogenesis; and how concepts such as “social situation of development” and “neoformation” can be re-appropriated by social scientists to investigate the formation of social forms. For example, in my research, the notion of the SSoD of the working class as a *predicament*, instead of merely an amalgam of “objective conditions” or “context”, has been key in developing Gramsci’s concept of the economic-corporate condition, which I explain further in the text. It allowed me to conceive of the era of offensive neoliberal reform that began in the 1990s, as a predicament for the Egyptian workers’ movement, from which it only could liberate itself by developing itself: i.e. creating the necessary neoformations that enabled it to overcome its condition.

Unit of Analysis

In order to study and understand the formation of human consciousness, Vygotsky followed the methodology of Romantic Science against the positivism

¹⁰¹ Wertsch 1985: 19.

¹⁰² See Blunden 2011.

¹⁰³ “Sociogenesis” is a term for the formation and development of social Subjects: groups, institutions, families, nations, classes, et cetera.

and reductionism of Pavlov's reflexology and the natural sciences. What Goethe called the *Urphänomen*, Hegel the Concept, and Marx the cell-form of a phenomenon, Vygotsky designated as the **unit of analysis**.

*In our view, an entirely different form of analysis is fundamental to further development of theories of thinking and speech. This form of analysis relies on the partitioning of the complex whole into **units**. In contrast to the term 'element', the term 'unit' designates a product of analysis that possesses **all the basic characteristics of the whole**. The unit is a vital and irreducible part of the whole. The key to the explanation of the characteristics of water lies not in the investigation of its chemical formula but in the investigation of its molecular movements. In precisely the same sense, the living cell is the real unit of biological analysis because it preserves the basic characteristics of life that are inherent in the living organism.*¹⁰⁴

Vygotsky realized that human consciousness and behavior could never be studied directly, but that its knowledge was always mediated by sources, traces and indices. Instead of trying to minimize the subjectivity of the researcher in his passive observation of his or her test subjects, the Russian psychologist embraced this interaction as a collaborative, reciprocal process that actively constructed human behavior. As a unit of analysis for human behavior he took the simplest determination of this relation: joint artifact-mediated action, in which "artifact" entailed both material (tools) and ideal (signs) forms of mediation.¹⁰⁵ Deploying a unit of analysis is not an exercise in reductionism. The biological study of the cell does not replace or render unnecessary the study of organs and the functioning of the body as a whole. Instead, it is the *conceptual starting point* of analysis.

Vygotsky distinguished between the notion of a unit of analysis and that of a **microcosm**.

*When our Marxists explain the Hegelian principle in Marxist methodology they rightly claim that each thing can be examined as a **microcosm**, as a universal measure in which the whole big world is reflected. On this basis they say that to study one single thing, one subject, one phenomenon **until the end**, exhaustively, means to know the world in all its connections. In this sense it can be said that*

¹⁰⁴ Vygotsky 1987: 46.

¹⁰⁵ Blunden 2010: 195.

*each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of relationships is reflected in him.*¹⁰⁶

Vygotsky, alongside the Soviet linguist Valentin Voloshinov, called the word a microcosm of consciousness, as it refracted the full spectrum of human meanings and thought-forms.¹⁰⁷ Whereas a unit of analysis is the logical starting point for the unfolding of a phenomenon in thought, a microcosm represents the opposite movement: the recognition of the developed *Gestalt*, the concrete universal, in one of its individual parts.

Project

Summarizing the characteristics of a scientific unit of analysis, Blunden listed three requirements. Firstly, *"It is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing."*¹⁰⁸ The unit of analysis is the most primitive and simple appearance or form of a particular phenomenon. Apples may differ in taste, color, and size, but in contrast to a fruit basket they constitute a concrete particularization of "fruit". Secondly, *"It exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena"*.¹⁰⁹ The primitive concept, the simplest determination, displays a capacity to be developed into a mature and concrete form of thought. The apple contains the seed, which, when planted, grows into an apple tree. Thirdly, *"It is itself an existent phenomenon (not a principle or axiom or hypothetical force or such like non-observable)."*¹¹⁰ An apple is not only an abstract concept of "appleness" as evoked in this sentence, it is also a real thing that can be consumed or thrown at someone. This last requirement interestingly connects the unfolding of a phenomenon in thought, its conceptual *Bildung*, to its development in reality. A unit of analysis should be *"both a concept and an existent reality"* that *"...must be conceived and chosen so as to provide the building block for **conception** as well as **actuality**."*¹¹¹

Even though the movement of a phenomenon in thought does not replicate its real, historical trajectory, its unit of analysis is the starting point of both its actual and comprehended development. In the spirit of Romantic Science, Blunden

¹⁰⁶ Vygotsky in Blunden 2010: 143. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ See Voloshinov 1973.

¹⁰⁸ Blunden 2010: 190.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 191.

stressed that the discovery of a unit of analysis that is appropriate for a certain subject matter was not a question of the rigorous application of scientific rules and categories, but required “...a transition from reflection and being-with the object, until a certain *aperçu* makes possible the leap to an abstract representation of the complex whole in the form of an archetype.”¹¹² Rather than a process of deduction or induction, the unit of analysis emerges from the activity of the researcher in his field, when his intuitions about his object of research mature into scientific concepts. Many social scientists engaged in field work recognize such a moment of “*aperçu*” or *Aha-Erlebnis*, when they find a road into the complex problematic they are investigating.¹¹³

What is the unit of analysis for an emancipatory science? Blunden proposed “collaborative Project” as the cell-form of such an interdisciplinary social science. A collaborative project is a shared system of human activities and mediating artifacts, which projects itself forward to a certain goal or ideal.¹¹⁴ Simply put, a collaborative Project is a gathering of people involved in a shared activity around a specific goal. This can be a formation as humble as a knitting group or as grand as a nation state. I discuss the notion of Project in more detail in the next chapters.

Preliminary Conclusions

Looking back at my own appropriation of my research object, it more or less followed Marx’s “descending” and “ascending” movements. Firstly, the subject matter presented itself to me as an amorphous collection of phenomena, seemingly impossible to grasp in its entirety. The conception I had of the relation between intellectuals and the Egyptian workers’ movement was sketchy and blurry and held the promise of many different avenues for investigation. The benefit of studying a phenomenon over five years – and having enjoyed an education as a historian – is that the subject matter saliently presents itself as a changing thing, as a process. It forces the researcher to acknowledge its current shape as but an element in a temporally chain of formations. An understanding of the phenomenon entails not only an investigation into its actual being, but also

¹¹² Blunden 2012. Emphasis in original.

¹¹³ Personally, I only realized the central importance of the Mahalla strikes for the developing workers’ movement after two field trips in 2008 and 2009, and it took me another full year to develop this intuition into a concept.

¹¹⁴ Blunden 2010: 313.

into its becoming and a conception of its full developmental process. However, it was impossible for me to grasp the subject matter and all its manifold determinations in thought all at once. Traditionally, at this point, the researcher is confronted with two options. Firstly, a “nomothetic” or “generalizing” approach would lead me to an abstraction of the subject matter. Through a study of many individual “instances” of a phenomenon I abstract properties and attributes that I deem relevant, and I derive from them laws and explanatory principles, which in turn “govern” the phenomenon. However, the understanding of a phenomenon becomes a “flattened” aggregation of data, and fails to be a coherent representation of the subject matter in thought.¹¹⁵ Alternatively, an “idiographic” or “particularizing” method focuses on one specific case, which is taken as an archetype of the broader phenomenon. But how do I know if a particular case study is representative? What nomothetical techniques gain in generalizing power, they lose in concreteness. The idiographic approach, for its part, may offer a detailed and multifaceted understanding of a specific case, but often falls short in its capacity to offer an explanation for the whole phenomenon.

The concepts of “unit of analysis”, “cell-form”, or “collaborative Project”, and “microcosm”, offer practical methodological solutions to this conundrum. The notion of “microcosm” appears as an implicit argument in favor of the idiographic approach, as a whole phenomenon can be understood through one of its instances. With regard to my research, the Mahalla strike movement could be understood as a microcosm of the development of the Egyptian workers’ movement at large. All elements of worker emancipation, although most of them embryonic, were present in this instance of struggle. Still, in order to make sense of the *movement* of the workers – their trajectory – it was insufficient to give just a description of the Mahalla microcosm. I had to make an abstraction of the amorphous and chaotic way in which the case study presented itself to me to get to the “heart of the matter”. This core aspect of the phenomenon was not to be an arbitrary element or category imposed from “outside” the subject matter. From the experience of my field work emerged the notion of the “Strike”¹¹⁶, concretely embodied in the phenomenon of the Mahalla strikes of 2006-2008, as the “simplest determination” from which a conceptual understanding of my research

¹¹⁵ Fantasia 1995: 274.

¹¹⁶ I capitalize “Strike” when I mean the logical and archetypical development of workers’ protest in the space of the workplace. See *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*.

could be build. The Strike is the collaborative Project of the workers' struggle: starting from simple workplace protests, and developing into more complex forms of action, organization, and thought. The Strike fulfills the role of both a conceptual starting point – i.e. the activity that enables workers to overcome their economic-corporate predicament and pushes forward their whole development as a class – and a historical beginning, as the Mahalla strikes put in motion the particular trajectory that led to the current ensemble of mass strikes and independent trade unions. I develop the concept of the Strike in more detail in *Proletarian Sociogenesis*. Before I arrive at the archetypical developmental trajectory of the workers' movement, I first discuss the methodological implications of the notions of activity, Subjectivity, learning, and instruction in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 2

Activity and Subjectivity

*O body swayed to music,
O brightening glance.
How can we know the dancer
From the dance?*

William Butler Yeats, *Among School Children* (1928)

Activity as Substance

The first philosopher to consider human consciousness as a valid object of scientific research was probably René Descartes.¹¹⁷ He could doubt the input of his senses, but not the fact that he doubted, i.e. the consciousness of doubting. The simple fact of consciousness was the starting point of his philosophy. Yet, Descartes also pointed out that the movement of his consciousness was not of his own volition, that it reacted against and upon stimuli from “outside”. He posited being and thought as two opposite, independent and self-containing *Substances*.¹¹⁸ The concept of a curve is of an entirely different type of existence than an actual curve. But how then can “things outside thought” and “thought” correspond if there is nothing “common” to both Substances, if there is no “third” Substance in which both categories could be expressed and mediated? This became the fundamental Cartesian problematic of the duality of thought and being. The Catholic Descartes introduced God as a metaphysical “third”, to solve the contradiction and mediate between the movement of material bodies and spiritual thought forms.¹¹⁹

A fundamental step to overcome Cartesian dualism was made by Spinoza. Instead of trying to answer the question of how thought and being, as two different spheres of existence, interacted, he claimed that “*the problem is insoluble only because it has been wrongly posed*”¹²⁰. Spinoza argued that there was but one

¹¹⁷ Blunden 2012.

¹¹⁸ In the jargon of philosophy, a “substance” is a category which is irreducible and not derived from something else.

¹¹⁹ Ilyenkov 2010: 21-6.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 31.

object of investigation: the human, thinking body. Thought is not a Substance in itself, but a mode of existence of the human body. Thought and “extension” are opposite and independent attributes of one and the same Substance, which Spinoza called Nature and identified with God. Thinking and being coincide, one is not the cause or effect of the other. The body itself becomes the object of its own activity. A human as a “thinking body” is able to actively and creatively shape its own movement in relation to other thinking and non-thinking bodies – other humans and “things”. Knowledge of the world “outside thought” is derived from the consciousness of the interaction between the “thinking body” and the world. Thus, the key contradiction of epistemology was not between “immaterial thought” and the “material world”, mind and body, but between Subject and Object.

Johann Fichte further humanized Spinoza’s monism by taking **activity** as the Substance of existence. Subject and Object, the Self and the World, were both attributes and even products of the Substance of activity and did not exist separately. However, because he tried to deduce the nature of society from the perspective of the individual person, Fichte perceived activity as an *individual* rather than a *social* phenomenon.¹²¹ It would take Hegel to “socialize” Fichte’s notion of Subject, and Marx to combine Hegel’s Subject with Fichte’s emphasis on activity as the Substance of human existence.

Subject

Ironically, the term “subject” has come to denote both the agent and object of an activity. The “subject matter” is the “object” of research, and Kings rule their “subjects”, while, in the philosophical and grammatical tradition, the “Subject” is an actor. For Immanuel Kant the Subject was the coincidence of the *cogito* – the knowledge-processing unit – the *agent* – the moral actor – and the *ego* – self-consciousness – in an individual human being. Hegel accepted this triadic nature of the Subject, but argued against Kant and Fichte that these attributes did not constitute an *individual* but a *social* unit; and that they were never immediately “present” at the same time.¹²² In Hegel’s view a Subject was a combination of the “moments” of the Individual, the Particular and the Universal. Offering a

¹²¹ Blunden 2005/6.

¹²² Blunden 2010: 43.

materialist reading of Hegel, Blunden explained that: "...the subject entails an all-sided relation between the consciousness of finite, mortal individuals, the particular forms of on-going activity and relations entailed in the relevant social practice, and the universal products through which the Subject is represented".¹²³ Throughout any human activity, these moments mediate each other. Verbal communication, for example, is constituted by speech (Particular) between speakers (Individual) using language (Universal). Likewise, the concept of "wage labor" is mediated by the existence of wage laborers (Individual), the practice of working for a wage (Particular) and the commodities valorized on the market (Universal).

Hegel sublated the Cartesian dualism between being and thinking, and the Kantian dichotomy between things-as-they-appear and things-in-themselves by stressing the interpenetration of Subject and Object. In Hegel's philosophy, the relation between Subject and Object was not a relation between Man and Nature or the ideal and the material, but of humanity to itself. Firstly, an Object was understood as that which is "external" *from the perspective of a particular Subject*. This meant that from the viewpoint of one Subject, another Subject can be an Object, and Subjects are continuously objectified by other Subjects. Secondly, a Subject can only exist as a Subject by objectifying itself "into" the world.¹²⁴ Thought is objectified into speech, sorrow into tears, protests into committees, and these objectifications in turn shape and objectify the Subject. In the human world, an Object is always an Object *for* a Subject, and a Subject is always objectively present. In other words, a Subject's agency and presence in the world

¹²³ Blunden, 2010: 63. Note that in most theoretical conceptions "the Subject" is limited to an individual body. For example, Alain Touraine, although he conceives of a Subject as a "social movement", claimed that "*The subject is the labour through which an individual transforms him or herself into an actor...*" (Touraine 1995: 374) Likewise, in her article on revolutionary subjectivities, Salwai Ismail posited that: "... we need to consider the individual selves that formed the collective... a process through which intersubjective understandings of individual experiences become constitutive of a social imaginary and translate into shared sentiments and agreed ideas and aspirations." (Ismail 2011: 990) The "individual experiences", however, are already mediated by the participation of individual bodies in the material and ideal realities of social Subjects. There is no *a priori* "individual" person who becomes a member of a collective when he interacts with other individual persons. Individuality – the "Self" – is rather constituted through joint artifact-mediated activities, i.e. "social interaction". It is not a coincidence that in the age of neoliberalism: "... theorizing on subjectivity assumes the prevalence of discourses on individualism..." (Moore 2011: 20)

¹²⁴ For Hegel, objectification was always alienation as it separated Man from abstract thought. Marx distinguished between objectification, which was a neutral process inherent to the human condition, and alienation which was an inhuman form of objectification. See "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy" in Marx 1992. Also see *Chapter 1 Development*.

is constantly mediated by the ideal/material artifacts that it produces or appropriates.

Praxis

Marx recognized the mediated unity between the Universal, Individual and Particular as the “real premises” of social reality:¹²⁵ “...*the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.*”¹²⁶ Whereas the (later) Hegel shifted towards an idealist interpretation of the Subject by setting up Thought as the Substance of existence, Marx explicitly posited “activity” as the Substance of humanity in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts and in his Theses on Feuerbach: “*All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.*”¹²⁷ Knowledge is the product not of passive contemplation, but of active and self-conscious experience: i.e. “practical-critical” activity or praxis¹²⁸. Both Subject and Object are the outcomes of human activity, as human activity mediates the relation between Subject and Object. Activity is an objectification of the Subject, and, vice versa, the Subject is constructed through objectified activity.¹²⁹ In his later writings, Marx focused on labor as the defining human activity: “*Labour... is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself.*”¹³⁰ Gramsci, on the other hand, continued to use praxis as the unity of the different yet commensurable activities of philosophy–politics–economics.¹³¹

Both by its activity and by its appropriation and use of socially produced utterances and tools the individual body cannot escape being a social creature. Its participation in a Subject is incorporated, embodied as a **Subjectivity**. Moreover, as an individual body is part of different Subjects, it is also, in Gramsci’s words, a

¹²⁵ Blunden 2010: 99.

¹²⁶ Marx and Engels 1970: 42.

¹²⁷ Marx 1992: 423.

¹²⁸ Gramsci 1971: 402-3.

¹²⁹ Marx 1992: 389.

¹³⁰ Marx 1990: 133.

¹³¹ Gramsci 1971: 403.

“composite body”: a temporally-fragmented ensemble of social relations.¹³² Likewise, Voloshinov distinguished between an individual’s natural body, and his or her “individuality”.¹³³ An individuality is the crystallization and combination of different Subjectivities in a human body. Conversely, a Subject always consists of individual bodies participating in a particular activity. In order to analytically separate the “dancer” from the “dance”, I distinguish between a “social” and an “individual” Subject, which, respectively, emphasize the collective gathering of bodies in joint activity, or the individual person in whom different Subjects are refracted. In terms derived from the previous chapter: whereas the social Subject is a *Gestalt*, the individual Subject is a “microcosm” of various *Gestalten*.

By combining individual actors, their particular activity and universal cultural artifacts into one coherent, yet differentiated, “unit”, the Hegelian-Marxist concept of the Subject overcomes the classic dichotomy between “individual” and “society”, and offers a solution to bridge methodological individualist and collectivist notions of “class”. As a social Subject, the working class is composed of individual workers, their activity, and ideal and material artifacts. Likewise, “worker”, is a Subjectivity, a participation in and sharing of the ideal and material practices of a social Subject, which exists in a human body in combination with other Subjectivities – the total of which make up the “identity” of a person.¹³⁴

Activity Theory

Marx’s theses on Feuerbach would become “...*the founding document of Activity Theory...*”¹³⁵ As I discussed before, Vygotsky saw joint-artifact mediated action as the unit of analysis of human activity. Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontyev¹³⁶, a student of Vygotsky’s, aimed to expand the insights of Soviet cultural psychology to other dimensions and disciplines of the social sciences through Activity Theory. Leontyev posited that, historically, human beings engaged in activities to satisfy a

¹³² Thomas 2009: 393; 398.

¹³³ “To avoid misunderstandings, a rigorous distinction must always be made between the concept of the individual as natural specimen without reference to the social world... and the concept of individuality which has the status of an ideological-semiotic superstructure over the natural individual and which, therefore, is a social concept.” (Voloshinov 1973: 34)

¹³⁴ I develop a concept of the working class in *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*.

¹³⁵ Blunden 2010: 94.

¹³⁶ See Leontyev 1978.

certain need. The development of complex activities entailed the disarticulation of activities into a chain of actions – i.e. a social division of labor – of which the direct object differed from the object of the activity as a whole. The routine execution of some actions internalized these as subliminal operations.¹³⁷ Thus Leontyev differentiated between activities, actions, and operations. *Activities* are a societally produced series of conscious, object-oriented and artifact-mediated individual *actions*, which, in turn, consist of unconscious, “incorporated” routine *operations*. Activity mediates the relation between Subject and Object, and artifacts, in turn, mediate the relation between Subjects and their activity.¹³⁸

Yrjö Engeström¹³⁹ expanded Leontiev’s theory with the notion of **system of activity**. An activity does not only involve humans and their object-oriented actions, mediated by material tools and conceptual signs; it also constitutes a coherent but often contradictory *system* comprising rules, relations, and divisions of labor, which organize the subjects’ actions and relations towards (1) their object, (2) co-participants in the activity, and (3) other agents who are engaged in separate and distinct activities that are oriented towards the same object. The importance of Engeström’s concept of activity is that it draws attention to the internal systematicity and coherence of a more or less stable pattern of human activity.

Positing collaborative **Project** as the unit of analysis of human activity, Andy Blunden emphasized that the object or goal of a system of activity is not only an “external” aim to which the social Subject is directed; but that it is (also) immanently projected from the “internal” activity of its participants. This is a critique of Leontyev’s teleological and functionalist view, which conceives of activity as an object-oriented process of gratification. In traditional Soviet Activity Theory the Object over-determines the Subject’s activity, which stands in clear opposition to the ethics of an emancipatory science where agency and immanence are at the core of the Project. Goals not only constitute activities, they are also their *products*. The object of an activity-system emerges from the process of collaboration of its participants and entails both cooperation and conflict.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 205-6.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 174-8.

¹³⁹ See Engeström 1987, 1990, 1992.

Whereas the initial goal – that might interpellate¹⁴⁰ “from without” the construction of a social Subject – logically and historically predates the activity-system, the concretization of the goal of activity is a living process “from within”, which appropriates and internalizes the Object. This means that the *telos* of an activity-system is never given in advance, but the “negotiated” outcome of an immanent and contingent development.¹⁴¹

Blunden’s concept of Project points towards the immanent and developmental character of the Subject. If I conceive of the “worker Subject” as composed of individual wage laborers, their labor activity, and the tools and signs they use when laboring, then I have only conceptualized a passive workforce, which is rather an Object of the capitalist mode of production than a social Subject with its own volition. The goal of the workers’ activity *as workers* does not belong to themselves, but to their patron. Rather, their lack of means of production and their need to reproduce the means of their existence forces them into the activity of wage labor. A concept of workers as a social Subject emphasizes above all their agency. Even though the notion of a “working class” presumes a certain structural position within the ensemble of the relations of production, it is far from identical to it. The workforce is a Subject-in-itself, an undifferentiated collection of wage laborers that has the potential to develop into a social Subject. The “working class” is not a sociological label to categorize a specific layer of the population according to a fixed set of rules and parameters; it is the process of the becoming of a proletarian social Subject; the movement of workers towards Subjectness.¹⁴²

Subjectness

Marx famously commented that:

History does nothing, it ‘possesses no immense wealth’, it ‘wages no battles’. It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not,

¹⁴⁰ The term “interpellation” refers to Althusser’s concept of Subjectivity constitution in which a Subjectivity is “called into being” by addressing or hailing an individual as a specific Subject. (Althusser 2001: 115) I use the term in a slightly different and broader framework, in the sense that a certain Object or Subject, because of its saliency in the social world, can “invite itself” to be appropriated by another individual or social Subject. In other words, “interpellation” is “forced” recognition.

¹⁴¹ Blunden 2010: 208-10; 255-7.

¹⁴² I develop this line of thought in detail in *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*.

*as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.*¹⁴³

As a moral actor, a Subject requires self-consciousness and intentionality. Otherwise a person or collectivity would be merely a passive being, swept and pushed along the trajectory of its life process by external forces. Human beings are “teleological”; not in the sense that they are mechanistically determined by an external final cause – be it history or God – but meaning that they create finalities for themselves. Self-consciousness, however, is not immediately there; it is not taken for granted; it is something that has to develop from mere “being” to “conscious being” to “being self-conscious”. In Hegel’s dialectic, it is the immanent movement from a Subject-in-itself to a Subject-for-itself, from: “...consciousness in general, which has **an object** as such...” through “...self-consciousness, for which **the self** is the object...” to “...the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, where the spirit sees **itself as the content of the object** and as in and for itself determinate...”¹⁴⁴

The development of workers as a social Subject requires a process of *Bildung*: a maturation of its ideal and material objectifications and neoformations. The historical emergence of the term “workers”, designating a certain group of proletarianized wage laborers, is equally significant as the rise of strike committees and trade unions.¹⁴⁵ The working class only exists as an amorphous workforce as long as it has not developed a concept of itself as a class: “...people who have been kicked off their land and have found a living by selling their labor by the hour, but they still think of themselves as farmers who have fallen on hard times, and have no concept of themselves as proletarians, for example.”¹⁴⁶

This is not a question of “false” consciousness – an unfortunate term never used by either Hegel or Marx – because the contradiction is not between a form of consciousness and the external truth of a reality lying beyond the phenomenon, but between the actual position of the Subject within its developmental trajectory and its current Subjectness; or, put differently, between the current *Gestalt* of a

¹⁴³ Marx and Engels 1975: 93.

¹⁴⁴ Hegel in Blunden 2010: 81.

¹⁴⁵ With regard to Egypt, I briefly discuss the emergence of the “modern” word for workers in *Chapter 5 The Precapitalist Formation*.

¹⁴⁶ Blunden 2010: 60.

phenomenon and its proper position within the chain of *Gestalten* of which it is but a moment.

For example, the concept of “everyday”, “molecular”, or “hidden” resistance expresses worker actions which are only *implicit* forms of resistance.¹⁴⁷ Asef Bayat justly observed that: “*Under repressive conditions, labor resistance may take the form of absenteeism, sabotage, disturbances, theft, religious practice, and poor quality production. Labor activism of this nature is not necessarily unplanned or purely ‘spontaneous’...*”¹⁴⁸ Researchers are quick to point out that these activities often do not represent coherent and self-conscious acts of social or political contestation. But then the question arises when and how these actions stop from being simple *survival strategies* and transform into subaltern *forms of resistance*. If “everyday” or “hidden” resistance is acknowledged as but a survival strategy, then it conceives of the subaltern not as a Subject, but as a passive Object of poverty, class war, or State policies. Sabotage, theft, et cetera, do not represent any real agency, only a kind of social reflexology. On the other hand, if “everyday” or “hidden” resistance is recognized by the researcher as an “objective” form of struggle against the status quo – even though the resisting actors have not developed a concept of their actions as “resistance” – in that case a consciousness and intentionality, i.e. Subjectness, is externally imputed to the subaltern Subject.¹⁴⁹

Both approaches colonize the Subject because they do not appreciate these forms of resistance as actualities of a process with more “advanced” potentialities. Robin Cohen contemplated that: “*The hidden forms are at a lower level of consciousness but can be seen as part of an incremental chain of consciousness leading towards a ‘higher’, more politicized, form of consciousness. This seems a somewhat more plausible position, though any incremental process cannot be viewed deterministically.*”¹⁵⁰

A grassroots workers’ movement does not start with high-profile and explicit actions and discourses. Strikes always start from everyday conditions. They do, however, contain the potentiality of a critique of capitalist property relations, union bureaucracy, alienation, representative democracy, et cetera. A means of survival can develop into a conscious form of resistance, thereby developing a subaltern Subject-in-itself towards a Subject-for-itself.

¹⁴⁷ See Cohen 1980; Scott 1985.

¹⁴⁸ Bayat 1996: 180.

¹⁴⁹ See Abbink and van Walraven 2003: 1-10.

¹⁵⁰ Cohen 1980 :21.

How can the survival of a subaltern group become conscious resistance, resistance turn into overt protest, and protest transform into emancipation? From the perspective of an emancipatory science, the task of a critical scientist is not only to describe the current state of affairs, but also to reveal those potential roads of development that are immanent within the current *Gestalt* of the movement. A social scientist should not only investigate a Subject from the perspective of its current “state” – nor even from the perspective of the sum of its current plus previous moments in its development – but he or she should also dare to imagine potential future trajectories of the Subject in order to form an integral concept of the phenomenon. Rational speculation is the logical mirror of historical or genetic investigation.¹⁵¹ Or, as Gramsci voiced it: “No one can be expected to imagine new things; but one can expect people... to exercise fantasy so as to round out the full living reality on the basis of what they know.”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ With Bernstein’s caveat in mind that: “... actual development is forever bringing forth new arrangements and forces, forever new facts, in the light of which that exposition... seems inadequate and, to a corresponding extent, loses the ability to serve as a sketch of the development to come.” (Bernstein in Townshend 2007: 51) However, *pace* Bernstein, one could argue that speculation is not isolated from “actual development”, because it also may act as proleptic instruction, becoming one of the “facts” in the “arrangements of forces”.

¹⁵² Gramsci in Morton 2007: 171.

CHAPTER 3

Learning and Instruction

...emancipation is not a form of graduation ceremony... but rather it is a process of struggle by people who are not yet 'ready' for emancipation, and who can become ready for emancipation only by launching the struggle themselves, before anyone considers them ready for it.

Hal Draper, *Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels* (1971: 95)

Interiorization

When considering the activity of learning it seems logical to put competence before performance. For how can one perform a task before knowing how to do it? *Pace* the nativist argument, Vygotsky, however, claimed that it is not capacity that determines performance, but performance that constructs capacities.¹⁵³ Simply put, a child develops speech by trying to speak. A capacity or neoformation is matured as the *result* of overcoming the current social situation of development (SSoD). 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.*”¹⁵⁴ The notion of interiorization or “ingrowth” is key to Vygotsky’s “general genetic law of cultural development”, which claims that every neoformation appears twice: first “inter-mentally”, then “intra-mentally”.¹⁵⁵ 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.¹⁵⁶ The practice is transformed during its interiorization, becoming similar yet different to its original objectification.¹⁵⁷ For example, Vygotsky and Voloshinov explained that a child who learns to speak also interiorizes this objectification as “inner speech”: “*...consciousness could have developed only by having at its disposal material that was pliable and expressible by bodily means.*”¹⁵⁸ The participation in shared systems of activity stimulates the formation of Subjectivities and

¹⁵³ Ratner 1991: 182-3; Wertsch 2007: 188.

¹⁵⁴ Vygotsky, 1978: 56.

¹⁵⁵ Bakhurst 2007: 53-4; Daniels 2007: 309; Meshcheryakov 2007: 162.

¹⁵⁶ Bakhurst 2007: 54; Wertsch 1985: 64.

¹⁵⁷ Bakhurst 2007: 54.

¹⁵⁸ Voloshinov 1973: 14.

Subjectness: *“...learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement.”*¹⁵⁹

Extrapolating this insight to the development of the workers’ movement, I suggest that the performance and objectifications of the Strike activity-system – organic intellectuals, strike committees, elected representatives, slogans, discourses, et cetera – are originally produced as new forms of mediation with factory management and the State, but these neoformations then turn “inward”, creating a worker Subjectivity and embryonic forms of Subjectness. Proletarian hegemony¹⁶⁰ – the ability of workers as a social Subject to lead society – is not some kind of metaphysical quality inherent in the abstract position of the wage laborers within the ensemble of production relations, but a whole of capacities that are constructed by the very concrete performance and experience of struggle.

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of instruction as a motor of ontogenesis. 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 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.”*¹⁶¹ The role of instruction in the learning process is to stimulate development, i.e. to assist the Subject in creating those neoformations that allow it to overcome its SSoD. Vygotsky also 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.¹⁶² An analysis of the developmental process of a proletarian activity-system should therefore look beyond the mere

¹⁵⁹ Vygotsky in Del Rio and Alvarez 2007: 279.

¹⁶⁰ The concept of hegemony is discussed in detail in *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*.

¹⁶¹ Vygotsky 1978: 86. Emphasis in original. Similarly, Lukács observed that: *“There is a distance between the consciousness of their [the workers’] situation that they actually possess and the consciousness that they could have – given their class position.”* (Lukács 2000: 65-6)

¹⁶² Cole, 2003: 183; Daniels, 2007: 322; Meshcheryakov, 2007: 166.

“actual level of development” of a strike and investigate which developments lie within the current ZPD of the movement, and which forms of prolepsis stimulate these developments.¹⁶³

Meshcheryakov distinguished between two forms of proleptic instruction: autoprolepsis and heterolepsis. **Autoprolepsis** is a form of self-instruction, whereby a Subject casts itself in the role of a future Self in a more developed phase of its formation. A classic example from ontogenesis is that of a child playing adult roles, projecting itself in a more advanced stage of its own trajectory.¹⁶⁴ In the domain of proletarian sociogenesis, the actions and structures of the “actually existing” worker Subject anticipate a future moment within its potential development.¹⁶⁵ Wildcat strikes and their illicit committees imagine (grassroots and independent) trade unions; workers’ control over factories establish their potential of running the economy without capitalists; and practices of participation, election and discussion within the movement foreshadow forms of participative democracy. The process of autoprolepsis affirms the maxim of Marx and Engels that the emancipation of the proletariat must and can be the activity of the working class itself.

In contradistinction, **heterolepsis** is the interpellation of a potential capacity of a Subject by another Subject. A classic example from ontogenesis is that of a parent speaking to her young child as if it were a developed conversation partner, even though it has not yet matured the capacity to engage in such a dialogue.¹⁶⁶ The potential development of the child is called into being by the proleptic instruction of the parent. With regard to proletarian sociogenesis, heterolepsis offers a means to imagine the instructive relation between worker and non-worker actors. However, transferring the ontogenetic notion of heterolepsis to the domain of proletarian sociogenesis 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. How can the heteroleptic role of “teachers” be reconciled with the principle of self-emancipation? I argue that Gramsci’s notions of

¹⁶³ Au 2007: 286.

¹⁶⁴ Meshcheryakov 2007: 167.

¹⁶⁵ Au 2007: 283.

¹⁶⁶ Meshcheryakov 2007: 166.

“intellectuals” and “dialectical pedagogy” offer a concrete solution to understand instruction as a reciprocal process of “educating the educator.”

Intellectuals

As I explained in the *Prologue*, the central problematic of this doctoral dissertation is the contradiction between the principle of self-emancipation and the historical division of labor. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argued that the historical division of labor liberated knowledge from its immediate context and stimulated abstract thinking, but at the price of a growing separation between practice and thought via the differentiation and consolidation of a category of professional “ideologists”, who became the bearers of “advanced” thought.¹⁶⁷ After the Dreyfus affair at the end of the nineteenth century, this social group was increasingly denoted as “intellectuals” in political discourse.¹⁶⁸

The societal separation between “theory” and “practice” was also reflected within the development of the workers’ movement. Socialist theories were largely constructed by intellectuals who were sympathetic to the plight of the workers, but who stood, in general, outside the “lifeworld” of the class.¹⁶⁹ When Karl Kautsky, as chief theoretician of the Second International, claimed that the idea of socialism developed separately – in bourgeois circles – and had to be introduced to the workers from without the movement, he expressed a certain reality on the ground.¹⁷⁰ With some critical reservations, Lenin¹⁷¹ and Lukács agreed that political consciousness had to be largely imported to the workers from without: *“For the social being of the proletariat places it **immediately** only in a relationship of struggle with the capitalists, while proletarian class consciousness becomes class*

¹⁶⁷ Marx and Engels 1970: 52; Ratner 1991: 98. Also see *Problems, Questions, Methods*.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas 2009: 407.

¹⁶⁹ Lukács 2000: 82-3.

¹⁷⁰ See *Prologue*.

¹⁷¹ In 1904 both Trotsky and Luxemburg attacked Lenin’s *general* “division of labor” between workers and revolutionaries (see Thatcher 2007). Draper (1990) and Shandro (2007) stressed that Lenin’s argument in *What is to be Done?* (1903) was developed against the *particular* liquidationist or “economist” trends within Russian Marxism. Whereas Lenin, in a “Russian context”; defended the crucial role of socialist theory and organization against “spontaneism”; Luxemburg, in a “German context”, emphasized the fundamental role of workers’ spontaneity and self-development against bureaucratism.

*consciousness proper when it incorporates a knowledge of the **totality** of bourgeois society.*"¹⁷²

The argument is that workers cannot come to a concrete understanding of capitalism and bourgeois society – and thus of themselves as workers – without the assistance of actors who participate in societal spheres other than the economic instance of the workplace. Yet this characterization of the role of intellectuals and “scientific thought” in the development of the workers’ movement encouraged paternalist and elitist conceptions of emancipation and heterolepsis. A new understanding of the pedagogical relation between intellectuals and workers was needed, which grasped both the predicament of the division of labor and the ways to overcome it.

Antonio Gramsci offered the most compelling solution by his typology of organic and traditional intellectuals, and his notion of dialectical pedagogy.¹⁷³ First of all, 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.¹⁷⁴ However, just as the division of labor made some men into farmers, it consolidated others as intellectuals. Elaborating Marx’s and Engels’s vague reflections on the “ideologists” in *The German Ideology*, Gramsci posited that intellectuals did not constitute an autonomous social group of their own, but that each class produces specialists who fulfill a function in the realm of production, culture or politics: i.e. in the social formation. Gramsci distinguished between organic and traditional intellectuals. **Organic** intellectuals are those ideologists and leaders whose sociogenesis is interwoven with the historical formation of the class they represent:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an

¹⁷² Lukács 2000 : 83.

¹⁷³ Other approaches conceptualized intellectuals as a separate “class” (e.g. Julien Benda) or class fraction (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu) with its own distinct interests; or as class-less (e.g. Karl Mannheim), and able to transcend their group of origin. For a discussion see: Kurzman and Owens (2002).

¹⁷⁴ Gramsci 1971: 347.

*awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.*¹⁷⁵

Conversely, those specialists whom a rising class finds already existing, as relics from a previous social form, are **traditional** intellectuals:

*...every “essential” social group which emerges into history out of the preceding economic structure, and as an expression of a development of this structure, has found (at least in all of history up to the present) categories of intellectuals already in existence and which seemed indeed to represent an historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social form.*¹⁷⁶

Traditional intellectuals often perceive themselves as autonomous and independent from the current ruling classes because they survived the social form from which they emerged.

In these two brief paragraphs, Gramsci offered (1) the working class a means to develop autonomously, via the production of its own organic intellectuals; and (2) non-worker actors a possibility to support the development of the workers' movement as traditional intellectuals joining the proletarian cause.¹⁷⁷

Organic intellectuals of the proletarian Subject emerge from the ranks of the workers themselves. **Directive** intellectuals are the leaders of the movement. They have authority and their arguments are persuasive.¹⁷⁸ **Cultural** intellectuals articulate the worldview and aesthetics of the movement. They infuse the Project with meanings and self-concepts through the elaboration of texts and signs. **Technical** intellectuals are involved in the procedural and organizational production and reproduction of the workers' activity as a coherent system. They know the labor laws, how to set up a strike fund or edit a paper.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 5.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 6-7.

¹⁷⁷ Note that the terms “organic” and “traditional” are not used in an absolute but in a relative sense, in accordance with the perspective of a specific class. From the point of view of the working class, the organic intellectuals of the bourgeois are traditional intellectuals. Throughout the text, the terms are used from the proletarian perspective.

¹⁷⁸ Barker, Johnson, and Lavalette 2001: 10.

¹⁷⁹ These three types of intellectuals are of course archetypes; they are Subjectivities themselves rather than persons. A worker can acquire the Subjectivity of proletarian leader, artist, theoretician and/or organizer through his participation and education in the workers' movement.

The Project of organic intellectuals is facilitated by the assistance of traditional intellectuals. Due to their position and activity within civil and political society, non-proletarian intellectuals – politicians, journalists, lawyers, artists, academics, et cetera – have developed directive, cultural and technical capacities to assist the developing worker Subject. 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.

Modes of Assistance

Different class projects require different modes of assistance to organize and secure their technical, cultural and political hegemony¹⁸⁰ and domination. Hegemony and domination are not neutral, class-independent concepts that are applicable in the same way to bourgeois or proletarian modes of governance.¹⁸¹ Drawing on Hegel's "theory of recognition", Blunden distinguished between three archetypical modes of assistance: colonization, commodification, and solidarity.¹⁸² The individual "Self" is the interpenetration of the relation between the "Self" and the "Other". Marx commented that:

*...a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man for Peter.*¹⁸³

However, in order to recognize an individual as oneself – and recognize oneself as another human being – something must be shared to express the equivalence: "If there is no international law, no shared ethos, no language or **anything** mediating the interaction, then how is any relationship possible?"¹⁸⁴ A real encounter between

¹⁸⁰ The concept of hegemony is discussed further in the text.

¹⁸¹ Thomas 2009: 416.

¹⁸² See Blunden 2004a, 2004b, 2004c. Non-recognition is not considered a mode of assistance.

¹⁸³ Marx 1990: 144.

¹⁸⁴ Blunden 2007. Emphasis in original. Mario Tronti made the same argument for the encounter between workers and capitalists: "Labor struggles are an irreplaceable instrument of self-consciousness

individual bodies presupposes that they do something together; that they participate in a shared system of activity. If unmediated, neither Subject recognizes the other as a Subject: inevitably the result of such an unmediated interaction is war and destruction of the Other (in a physical and/or cultural sense), or withdrawal from the interaction, whereupon both Subjects continue their separate ways.

Mediated contact between two Subjects creates a shared system of activity and produces forms of Subjectivity. Domination, enslavement, or **colonization** describes an asymmetrical relation between a dominant and submissive Subject, wherein the objectifications of the servant-Subject (language, customs, practices, cultural artifacts, property rights, et cetera) are destroyed and replaced by those of the Master-Subject. The Subjectivity that develops from the interaction between master and servant is polarized by the division between theory and practice. The servant can only recognize himself through the objectifications of the master. The colonizer directs and determines the objectifications of the servant, enforcing his own self-consciousness on the Other. However, the master can only externalize and realize himself and his culture in a roundabout way: through the controlled activity and objectifications of his servant. While the servant is *subjectively* dependent on the master, the colonizer is *objectively* dependent on the activity of the colonized for his existence as a Subject. Both Subjects find the means of mediation in each other, and are able to recognize themselves as Subjects – be it in a distorted way. The Hegelian master-servant dialectic is not only appropriate for the grand archetypical examples of historical slavery or colonization, but can also be found in more trivial and benign encounters between Subjects, such as patron-client relations and charity – as I explain below.

Commodification, exchange, or trade, happens when two Subjects meet and one is not able to subjugate the other, and both of them have something that the other Subject needs or desires. Gratification is realized through exchange and this interaction creates its own types of Subjectivity. Trade acts as a form of mediation through which both Subjects recognize each other and themselves as Subjects. The relation between two exchanging Subjects is relatively symmetrical, based on mutual respect for the Other; they recognize each other as a Subject and this

for capital: without them it does not recognize its own adversary. Consequently, it does not know itself.”
(Tronti 2005)

recognition is expressed as “rights”. Through their trade the two Subjects constitute a new, shared system of activity, while, at the same time, remaining separate Subjects. However, the Other is but a means to an end, and its worth is only calculated according to its capacity to satisfy the needs of the Self. For example, in the capitalist economy only the circulation of commodities is of interest to its participating Subjects, not the life activities and humanity of the Other. The Other is treated as a means to the end of the Self, instead of an end-in-itself; the Other is objectified and commodified. The dominance of the commodity relation has a tendency to “reify” all human relations.¹⁸⁵

The third mode of interaction between two Subjects is **solidarity**. Blunden defines solidarity as a single system of activity between different Subjects that strengthens the Subjectness of the whole system and of each participant. Solidarity is offering assistance in the development of the Subjectness of another Subject “...by voluntarily lending one’s own labor to the support of the other’s project according to their direction.”¹⁸⁶ Solidarity entails the freely chosen submission of the provider of assistance to the beneficiary, in order to increase the agency of the Other. Solidarity stands in sharp contrast to charity, which is a “benign” form of colonization. Whereas charity may alleviate the direct suffering or plight of the Other, it increases at the same time the dependency of the recipient and only strengthens the agency and autonomy of the donor. Conversely, solidarity is oriented towards the self-emancipation of the Other, as the benefactor assists in developing the means within the Other to emancipate itself: “Solidarity is the opposite of philanthropic colonization, because in assisting someone, the other remains the owner of the project and is thereby assisted in achieving self-determination.”¹⁸⁷

Finally, solidarity can become genuine **collaboration**, in the sense that two Subjects meld into a single Project, becoming both a mutual means to their single, shared end and constructing an immanent goal from their collaborative activity.

I argue that the notion of solidarity and collaboration open up a conceptualization of the instructive relation between intellectuals and workers, which imagines a role for non-proletarian actors in the development of the worker Subject without trampling the principle of the self-emancipation of the working class underfoot – i.e. what Gramsci called a “dialectical pedagogy”.

¹⁸⁵ Lukács 2000.

¹⁸⁶ Blunden 2010: 284.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 284.

Dialectical Pedagogy

Gramsci proposed that the workers' hegemony, i.e. class leadership, was realized through a **dialectical pedagogy**: a reciprocal process of learning and instruction between the workers' movement, intellectuals, and subaltern allies. Gramsci's notion of a dialectical pedagogy was influenced by Marx's third Thesis on Feuerbach:¹⁸⁸ *"The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself."*¹⁸⁹

Within a healthy and genuine development of the workers' movement there is no unilateral top-down relation between "teacher" and "student". Rather, there is a continuous reciprocity and mutual heterolepsis between participants in a shared activity-system such as the Strike. For example, referring to learning processes within a South-African strike movement, Linda Cooper noted that: *"During the strike... the boundary between educators and learners shifts markedly: ordinary workers play a collective, educational role, and their 'learners' are management, other workers and the general public outside the union."*¹⁹⁰

In my analysis of the Mahalla strike movement and the 25 January Revolution I argue that solidarity is the mode of assistance that enables this kind of dialectical pedagogy. Solidarity also paves the way for a collaborative Project between workers and non-worker actors, giving rise to a new type of intellectual who is the fusion of the proletarian organic intellectual and the "fellow traveler". Gramsci called this archetypical intellectual a democratic philosopher: *"...a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment."*¹⁹¹

Through a dialectical pedagogy, the societal separation between "theory" and "practice", the historical burden of the social division of labor, can be overcome.¹⁹² A dialectical pedagogy stimulates the elaboration of a living *Welt-und-Selbstanschauung* of the working class: a "philosophy of praxis". In reality, of course, the separation between "theory" and "practice" is not absolute, as every

¹⁸⁸ Thomas 2009: 436.

¹⁸⁹ Marx 1992: 422.

¹⁹⁰ Cooper 2005: 208.

¹⁹¹ Gramsci 1971: 350.

¹⁹² Thomas 2009: 16-7.

human action requires a degree of thinking, and every form of thinking requires a form of activity to become material: "...in any physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical, there exists a minimum of technical qualification, that is, a minimum of creative intellectual activity,"¹⁹³ Gramsci observed. The historical differentiation is rather between two, archetypical developmental lines of thought, which are rooted in two different types of activity. A proletarian philosophy of praxis entails the sublation of these two modes of thinking in the collaborative activity of the worker Subject and the development of a critical self-concept.

Philosophy of Praxis

Everyday and Scientific Concepts

Vygotsky differentiated between an "everyday" line of development, in which concepts are embedded within the direct experience and lifeworld of the child, and a "scientific"¹⁹⁴ line of development, in which concepts are "emancipated" from the "...unique spatiotemporal context in which they are used..."¹⁹⁵ A child first acquires everyday concepts within the setting of personal experience "...which is immediate, social, practical activity as against a context of instruction in a formal system of knowledge."¹⁹⁶ There is an organic and experimental connection between thinking and activity. Conversely, scientific forms of knowledge are acquired through explicit instruction; they are culturally transmitted and consolidated "everyday" concepts. There is no hierarchy in value between the two forms of knowledge:

*The strength of the scientific concepts lies in the higher characteristics of concepts, in the consciousness awareness and volition. In contrast this is the weakness in the child's everyday concepts. The strength of everyday concepts lies in spontaneous, situationally meaningful concrete applications, that is, in the sphere of experience and the empirical.*¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Gramsci 1971: 8.

¹⁹⁴ "Scientific" in this context means coherent and systematic knowledge, of which "science" is the penultimate form. For example, an elaborated theology is a "scientific" form of knowledge, even though it is not necessarily "true".

¹⁹⁵ Wertsch 1985: 33. Voloshinov probably developed Bukharin's distinction between "social psychology" and "ideology", who was, in turn, influenced by Plekhanov. (See Tihanov 1999)

¹⁹⁶ Daniels 2007: 311.

¹⁹⁷ Vygotsky in Hedegaard 2007: 249.

The dichotomy between “everyday” and “scientific” forms of knowledge is not uncommon in developmental psychology. For example, Basil Bernstein¹⁹⁸ made a distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” discourse. Horizontal discourses arise from everyday experiences. They are fluid, amorphous, and prone to change. Vertical discourses, on the other hand, are produced by explicit instruction and are (more) coherent, systematic and stable. As a Marxist, however, Vygotsky emphasized the **interpenetration** of everyday and scientific lines of conceptual development:

*The development of scientific concepts begins in the domain of conscious awareness and volition. It grows downwards into the domain of the concrete, into the domain of personal experience. In contrast, the development of spontaneous concepts begins in the domain of the concrete and empirical. It moves toward the higher characteristics of concepts, toward conscious awareness and volition.*¹⁹⁹

Likewise, the Marxist linguist Valentin Voloshinov distinguished between the spheres of “behavioral ideology” and “ideology proper”. Behavioral ideology is “...the whole aggregate of life experiences and the outward expressions directly connected with it.”²⁰⁰ It is “unsystematized” and “unfixed”, whereas ideology proper is a coherent system. Just as Vygotsky, Voloshinov stressed the reciprocal “sustenance” of the two spheres of knowledge:

*The established ideological systems of social ethics, science, art, and religion are crystallizations of behavioral ideology, and these crystallizations, in turn exert a powerful influence back upon behavioral ideology, normally setting its tone. At the same time, however, these already formalized ideological products constantly maintain the most vital organic contact with behavioral ideology and draw sustenance from it; otherwise, without that contact, they would be dead, just as any literary work or cognitive idea is dead without living, evaluative perception of it.*²⁰¹

The interpenetration of everyday and scientific concepts stimulates the development of **true concepts**.²⁰² In ontogenesis, true concepts develop in

¹⁹⁸ Bernstein 1999.

¹⁹⁹ Vygotsky in Hedegaard 2007: 249.

²⁰⁰ Voloshinov 1973: 91.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² In Vygotsky’s theory, the “truth” of concepts has little to do with their relation to “objective reality”. A concept is true when it represents an organic connection between everyday and

adolescence, through social practice, formal instruction, and participation in society. Everyday concepts can become true concepts when confronted with those learned at school or another instructive environment, and, vice versa, scientific concepts gain substance when confronted with everyday concepts.²⁰³

Why is all this relevant for the development of a philosophy of praxis? Because true concepts reinforce the agency of a Subject: *“The appropriation of concepts within a system of knowledge gives the child a possibility to use them consciously and intentionally.”*²⁰⁴ Below I argue that Gramsci provided a means of extending and translating Vygotsky’s “neutral” notion of ontogenetic concept development to the “ideological” domain of class sociogenesis.

Common Sense and Philosophy

Gramsci claimed that: *“...all men are philosophers...”*²⁰⁵ Everybody engages in **spontaneous philosophy**, a mode of thought which is comprised of:

- 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content;*
- 2. “common sense” and “good sense”;*
- 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of “folklore”.*²⁰⁶

“Spontaneous philosophy” is Gramsci’s way to investigate that sphere of human consciousness that Plekhanov called “social psychology”²⁰⁷, Voloshinov “behavioral ideology”, and Vygotsky “everyday knowledge”. It is the real, living, organic base from which advanced modes of consciousness are developed. Every thought already contains a conception of the world, but in spontaneous philosophy this is a *“...disjointed and episodic...”*²⁰⁸ awareness. Neither within a social Subject or the composite body of an individual Subject do the everyday

scientific modes of thinking. For example, a “true” concept of religion entails an everyday concept of “faith” and a scientific concept of “theology”.

²⁰³ Blunden 2010: 162.

²⁰⁴ Hedegaard 2007: 248.

²⁰⁵ Gramsci 1971: 323.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. Note that in Gramsci’s writings these three subcategories often mediate and subsume each other and their relation to philosophy. Sometimes folklore is called a part of common sense, sometimes common sense is called the folklore of philosophy, et cetera. See Gramsci 1971: 144; 325.

²⁰⁷ See Tihanov 1999.

²⁰⁸ Gramsci 1971: 323.

modes of thought attain coherence and unity.²⁰⁹ In other words, a Subject's spontaneous philosophy is the gelatinous and ever changing collection of everyday conceptions of social reality by that actor. *"One's conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and "original" in their immediate relevance."*²¹⁰ Spontaneous philosophy is an uncritical consciousness, but it is not a "false" consciousness or "self-deception".²¹¹ Even Lukács, perhaps the theoretician par excellence of "false consciousness", explained that: *"The direct forms of appearance of social being are not, however, subjective fantasies of the brain, but moments of the real forms of existence, the conditions of existence, of capitalist society."*²¹²

In opposition to the forms of "spontaneous philosophy" stands **philosophy** proper. Philosophy is the *"criticism and the superseding"*²¹³ of everyday modes of consciousness: *"To criticize one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world."*²¹⁴ The key qualities of philosophy are "homogeneity", "coherence", and "logicality".²¹⁵ Analogous to Voloshinov and Vygotsky, Gramsci emphasized the continuous exchange between forms of spontaneous philosophy and philosophy proper: *"Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continuously transforming itself, enriching it with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life."*²¹⁶

Because in class society the different class systems of activity are refracted in consciousness,²¹⁷ *"philosophy in general does not in fact exist."*²¹⁸ The process of **organic** mutual and reciprocal appropriation between everyday and scientific forms of consciousness is **distorted** within the subaltern Subject, which *"...has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group..."*²¹⁹ The worker has:

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 326.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 324.

²¹¹ Ibid. 327.

²¹² Lukács 2000: 79

²¹³ Gramsci 1971: 326.

²¹⁴ Ibid. 324.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 347.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 144.

²¹⁷ Voloshinov, 1973: 23.

²¹⁸ Gramsci 1971: 326.

²¹⁹ Ibid. 327.

*...two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.*²²⁰

The “falseness” – or rather contradictoriness – of the consciousness of the subaltern thus consists in the **lack of organicity** between its everyday and philosophical consciousness:

*Which therefore would be the real conception of the world: that logically affirmed as an intellectual choice? Or that which emerges from the real activity of each man, which is implicit in his mode of action? And since all action is political, can one not say that the real philosophy of each man is contained in its entirety in his political action?*²²¹

Despite his experience of the failure of Italian council communism, the rise of Fascism and his personal imprisonment, Gramsci, was not a pessimist. Subjectivities are not only interpellated by ideological state apparatuses as in Althusser’s determinist tale.²²² Within the common sense of the subaltern there is a “healthy nucleus”²²³ of **good sense** or “...a form of practical activity or will in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical ‘premiss’.”²²⁴ For Gramsci, good sense is the seed of a **philosophy of praxis**. The philosophy of praxis is an immanent critique of good sense:

*...it is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.*²²⁵

It has to be a complete and thorough criticism of common sense, while, at the same moment, it has to connect with the existing forms of spontaneous philosophy “...in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s

²²⁰ Ibid. 333.

²²¹ Ibid. 326.

²²² See Althusser 2001.

²²³ Ibid. 328.

²²⁴ Ibid. Also see Moore 2011 : 18.

²²⁵ Gramsci 1971: 405.

individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity."²²⁶ Just as Vygotsky's "true" concept is scientific thought grounded in social, everyday practice, the philosophy of praxis is the "true" coherent conception of a class of the world and of itself, rooted in its own forms of activity as a social Subject. True proletarian consciousness grasps its social being in its concreteness: as a movement with many determinations from the perspective of the working class: *"The knowledge of mediations, that is those **real** forms of mediation, through which the immediate forms of appearance of society are produced, presupposes a practical-critical, a dialectical-critical standpoint **vis-à-vis** social actuality: the practical-critical standpoint of the revolutionary proletariat."*²²⁷

The creation of a philosophy of praxis requires the formation of organic intellectuals and a dialectical pedagogy between masses and intellectuals to secure the organic and democratic exchange between the everyday and scientific consciousness of the class. For the proletariat, the development of a philosophy of praxis provides the practical-critical instrument to sublimate the division of labor: the subsumption of society's historically differentiated and separated self-consciousness back into humanity. It is an integral aspect of the hegemonic struggle and the formation of a proletarian hegemony.

For Gramsci, Marxists have to "discover" the reality of their emancipatory theories in the class activity of the workers, and, conversely, workers have to be able to recognize their own Subjectness in the systematic philosophies of the Left. For example, in her study of processes of collective learning in a South-African trade union, Linda Cooper elucidated how an embryonic philosophy of praxis developed in the activity-system of a strike:

Although much knowledge drawn on in the strike was action-oriented, practical and deeply contextualized, at the same time it was also abstract, theoretical and general. During the strike, the 'languaged' discourse of union workshops and meetings gave way to the more universal 'language of the body', a form which was concrete as well as very abstract, specific to immediate context as well as highly generalized. For example, the messages conveyed by the slogans on placards during the march were deeply contextualized in the experiences of the strikes, but also operated at a high level of generality and abstraction, making links between the

²²⁶ Ibid. 331.

²²⁷ Lukács 2000: 94. Emphasis in original.

state's economic policies, the emergence of a new, black elite, poverty and 'class war'.²²⁸

As I argue in the next chapter, it is exactly the immanent dynamic of the Strike activity that creates the possibility of a development of workers into a social Subject, and of good sense into a philosophy of praxis.

²²⁸ Cooper 2005: 213.

CHAPTER 4

Proletarian Sociogenesis

The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963: 8)

Workers and Class

Class Happens

The historical process of capital accumulation and proletarianization on a world scale has created forms of wage labor and exploitation that constructed the modern working class as a passive Object of history. Persons who can freely dispose of their labor power, but who do not possess their own (sufficient) means of production are forced into the activity-system of modern wage labor.²²⁹ Their activity of wage labor is born out of necessity, and oriented towards the goal of reproducing their natural and social life. By providing the tools for the actions that encompass the labor process, the capitalist – whose goal is profit realization – organizes, disciplines, and mediates the activity of the workers. Conversely, for him, workers are a means that mediate his activity of capital accumulation. The State also intervenes in the activity through forms of institutionalized coercion and consent. Through his domination and commodification of the activity of labor, the capitalist prevents workers from appropriating their labor as their own activity and immanent Project.

Robert Cox claimed that: “...if the production process creates the potentiality for classes, it does not *make* classes.”²³⁰ From an “immanent” point of view, this means that the formal and real subsumption of labor under capital²³¹ is in itself not the basis of working class formation, because it does not offer workers the means to develop themselves as a social Subject; on the contrary, capitalist wage labor is

²²⁹ *Pace* Hardt and Negri (2006) capitalist wage labor necessarily includes “immaterial” labor as well. Wage laborers are not defined by their products but by their position within relations of production. (Callinicos 2004)

²³⁰ Cox 1987: 355. Emphasis in original.

²³¹ See Marx 1990: 1023-38. Formal subsumption of labor under capital is the expansion of wage labor through the (formal) labor contract. Real subsumption of labor under capital is the integration of labor into the capitalist mode of production: the (real) transformation of the labor process itself.

the *objective* predicament of exploitation and alienation – the social situation of development in which the activity of struggle of the workers unfolds. The *subjective* mirror of this condition is the being-in-itself of the working class, its social and ideological fragmentation and dissolution – what Gramsci called the **economic-corporate condition** of a class. As Georg Lukács²³² argued, the workers' subaltern position within the relations of production is not automatically and mysteriously "reflected" in consciousness as a proletarian Subjectness. The logical and real starting point of the working class as a developing Subject is not the activity of capitalist wage labor, but the concrete class struggle over the buying and selling of labor power. This was also Marx's brief conception of class in the *Poverty of Philosophy*:

*Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself.*²³³

The Marxist historian E.P. Thompson agreed with such an "emergentist theory of class struggle"²³⁴:

*Class happens when some men, as a result of common experience (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations in which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which those experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.*²³⁵

People find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the

²³² Lukács 2000.

²³³ Marx and Engels 1976: 211.

²³⁴ Morton 2007: 211.

²³⁵ Thompson 1963: 9.

*process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness.*²³⁶

This echoes Marx's "negative" class description of the small peasantry in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

*Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, **they form a class.** Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, **they do not form a class.***²³⁷

Class does not simply "exist", but it "happens": it comes into being; it is a movement from a "mode of life" through struggle and "inherited or shared common experience" to a self-consciousness.²³⁸ The working class can be equally conceived as a system of activity, a social Subject, a movement, and a collaborative Project. All these conceptions are "true", in the sense that they highlight a different determination of the subject matter: coherence; agency; development; and immanence. Moreover, they all accentuate that, without collaborative struggle, there is no coherent working class, only an amorphous collection of wage laborers. Mario Tronti stressed that:

*We begin with struggle... It is not that before the mass labor struggle there was no working class. There was a different working class, in a lower level of development, with undoubtedly a lower degree of intensity of its internal composition, and with a shallower and less complex network of possible organization... As we have already indicated, we go from the struggle to the class: from the mass struggle to the massification of the class...*²³⁹

The shared experience, the community, and the joint activity of wage laborers do not themselves constitute a working class, but they are the foundations or **promise** of class formation. It is the potential generalization and organization of

²³⁶ Thompson 1978: 149. Note that this second "definition" of class emphasis "the process of struggling" as constitutive of class (consciousness) – as opposed to "cultural experiences" in the first paragraph. The transition from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself lies exactly in the transition from being the Object of capitalism to becoming a Subject in its own right.

²³⁷ Marx and Engels 1979: 187.

²³⁸ See "Social practices shaped by events give people the common experience of class identity and of collective action." (Cox 1987:356)

²³⁹ Tronti 2005.

this shared experience, struggle and activity, and the identification of interests that forms the real base of the working class as a concrete universal.

Mission or Project?

Zachary Lockman observed that: *“Workers and working classes have... been made to play a set role within a narrative of historical process whereby capitalist development produces a growing and ever more conscious working class, which is ultimately destined to achieve the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a postcapitalist social order.”*²⁴⁰ Teleological accounts of the formation of the working class assumed that wage laborers automatically and mechanically developed class consciousness because of a certain “historic mission”.

While I agree with the sentiment of the anti-teleological critique, there is a danger of mixing up the notion of “teleology” with “immanence”. A *teleological* method perceives the development of a process from the perspective of its supposed end point, while an *immanent* method develops (or speculates) the potential end point(s) of a process from its actuality. This is what Marx meant when he said that: *“Communism is for us not a **state of affairs** which is to be established, an **ideal** to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the **real** movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.”*²⁴¹ And, in the Communist Manifesto:

*The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.*²⁴²

The debate about the “truth” of the imagination of workers as a potential, universal class is not something that can be resolved “objectively” by the researcher acting as Laplace’s demon, because this intellectual discussion is itself historically entwined with the development of workers as a social actor. Gramsci mused that: *“It might seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity. But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this*

²⁴⁰ Lockman 1996: xix.

²⁴¹ Marx and Engels 1970: 56.

²⁴² Marx and Engels 1998: 51.

*kind of 'standpoint of the cosmos in itself' and what could such a standpoint mean?"*²⁴³ Philosophers and social scientists have been discussing the nature of the workers' class consciousness and their capacity to act collectively for the last two centuries, because something *real* and *salient* was happening that interpellated their intellectual activity. Conversely, workers have been able to develop forms of consciousness exactly because of theories that were organically connected to their struggles.²⁴⁴ Donald Sassoon explained that: "*Class consciousness was constructed by political activists... [but] For the activists to be successful, they must build on real foundations, not on thin air. The appeal must be recognized and interiorized.*"²⁴⁵

Evidently an immanent methodology contains an ethico-political dimension as the social scientist chooses which "imaginings" are to be explored as lines of development. But this proleptic quality is appropriate for a practical-critical activity that does not see itself as external to its object of research, but chooses to be in collaboration with its development.

The Object of Study

With regard to the study of the Egyptian working class, Joel Beinin engaged in self-criticism, claiming that in past writings²⁴⁶ he "...tended to homogenize and reify the working class as a historical subject and regard only those who engaged in collective struggle as real workers, despite our presentation of evidence that the historical experience of workers was diverse..."²⁴⁷ Beinin also posited that his focus on interviewing worker and leftist leaders "...led me even further away from understanding the experience, consciousness, and structural position of those workers who were not engaged in economic or political struggles in an organized framework over a protracted period of time."²⁴⁸ Beinin's *mea culpa* reflected a "revisionist" trend within the study of working classes, which, since the 1970s, began to shift the object of research from workers on the factory floor (the sphere of production) to their lives and

²⁴³ Gramsci 1971: 445.

²⁴⁴ An example of this reciprocal process is the "discovery" of the Egyptian working class by the Orientalist economist Jean Vallet in 1911. (Lockman 1996: 98-9) Would the Egyptian workers have developed a notion of themselves as a class independent from these "foreign" intellectuals? This is a moot point because the development of global capitalism and its forms of thought allowed Egyptian workers to use and appropriate such categorizations and theories as forms of mediation to understand their own globally-induced predicament.

²⁴⁵ Sassoon 1997: 8.

²⁴⁶ E.g. Beinin and Lockman 1987.

²⁴⁷ Beinin 1996: 267.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 267-8.

Subjectivities outside the workplace (the realm of reproduction).²⁴⁹ Workers were discovered as participants in wider Subjects such as the household, community, gender, cultural group, “ethnicity”, religion, et cetera. Attention was diverted away from grand actions such as mass strikes and demonstrations, and reoriented towards “everyday”, “invisible”, or “molecular” forms of resistance.

I concur with some of the “revisionist” criticisms, but with the qualification that, if one analyzes *class formation*, the object of research must remain... class formation! Bayat argued that if “...*class is perceived only in terms of an identity resting on a set of differentiations, then “class” can easily be confused with and subsumed into other forms of identity, such as gender, nation, ethnicity, and so on.*”²⁵⁰ For example, women play an important role in the formation of a workers’ movement, but when investigating *class*, the object of study is women as *workers* and not workers as *women*.²⁵¹ Likewise, studying workers without studying their

²⁴⁹ Burke 1996: 306. The development of Italian *Operaismo* into Autonomism is exemplary of this shift. *Operaismo* or “workerism” was developed by Mario Tronti as a critique of the practice of Italian communism – especially the reformist interpretation of Gramsci – and trade unionism. The resurgence of the Italian workers’ movement in the 1960s required a return of communist intellectuals to the struggles in the workplaces. The development of the strike dynamic in the factories would overcome the bureaucratization of the party and trade union structures, and reinvigorate the workers as a revolutionary Subject in the West. Conversely, the “material” base of the rise of Autonomism was the *defeat* of the mass strikes of the Italian workers’ movement in the late 1970s. Whereas *Operaismo* conceived of the workplace and the “mass worker” as the “cell-form” of the class struggle, Autonomism – demoralized by the workers’ defeat in the companies – turned its attention to the “social worker” and society at large as the locus of the fight against capital. Thus the most downtrodden subaltern layers are subsumed into the “working class”, whereas industrial wage laborers are excluded from this formation as a labor aristocracy. “*The class struggle is everywhere, therefore, and so too is the proletariat. Whoever in their conditions of life experiences the domination of capital is part of the working class.*” (Callinicos 2001) The “autonomist turn” from the workplace to “society” is all the more paradoxical since the neoliberal strategy for accumulation *increased* the exploitation of wage labor in the setting of the workplace. (Moore 2011: 31-3) If anything, neoliberalism worsened both the objective (exploitation) and subjective (fragmentation) predicament of the global working class. Autonomism withdrew from the workplace at a time when the presence of organic and traditional intellectuals was most needed.

²⁵⁰ Bayat 1996: 187.

²⁵¹ Koptiuch for example lamented that: “...*the dominant labor history narrative is decidedly masculinist in that it privileges... explosive, virile forms of struggle (strikes, organized political parties) over “feminine” subtler forms of resistance embedded in the practices of everyday life.*” (Koptiuch 1996: 64) I am very skeptical towards such a distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” forms of struggle. Without engaging in a profound debate about this dichotomous gender approach, I suggest it may be more productive to see an activity such as a strike as something which can “genderized” rather than it having a fixed gender character – e.g., as a system of activity, a strike

collective struggles from which they emerge as a social Subject, can produce valuable insights about workers as Objects of capitalism, as members of their community, as religious believers, et cetera, but *it is not an analysis of class formation*. Indeed, “worker” is but one Subjectivity within a modern wage laborer’s composite person. Any person is a microcosm of Subjectivities. Yet, even though the researcher of class formation should pay attention to these other Subjectivities and how they interact with a person’s Subjectivity as a worker, his object of study remains the development of worker Subjectness.

Although it is incorrect to project an external “essence” onto a developing Subject, it is equally erroneous to ignore the coherent identities that are immanently projected from a system of class activity: “...we must remember that in specific conjectures people... often do define themselves in terms of some essence... and act collectively as relatively coherent historical subjects.”²⁵² With regard to class as a contemporary Subjectivity, Sam Moore argued that: “There is no clear evidence that work has been marginalised as a source of identification and collectivity. Social identities are materially rooted in changing capitalist relations of production, as manifested in the workplace...”²⁵³ Let us then conclude with Zachary Lockman that: “With all this in mind, I would suggest that to the question of whether Middle Eastern working classes constitute coherent historical subjects and legitimate objects of inquiry we can respond with a properly nuanced and contingent ‘yes’.”²⁵⁴

The Strike

Returning to Andy Blunden’s conception of “unit of analysis”, in order to make sense of the *Gestalt* that is the working class at a certain point in its trajectory the researcher has to arrive at its simplest determination, from which the movement of the subject matter can be constructed in thought and reality. What is the cell-form of the worker Subject that possesses in embryonic form its fully developed *telos* or immanent Project of self-emancipation and self-determination? Rick Fantasia claimed that: “...the two kinds of social ‘action’ most relevant to the problem of class formation have tended to be (a) ‘strategic encounters’ between classes, or strategic

is much more than an “explosive” mobilizing moment, but also a process of debate, organization, et cetera.

²⁵² Lockman 1996: xxvii.

²⁵³ Moore 2011: 17.

²⁵⁴ Lockman 1996: xxviii.

industrial conflicts or collective actions that occur outside of the normal round of everyday life; and (b) processes of 'organizational mobilization (and demobilization).'"²⁵⁵ These activities elucidate the concept of "class struggle", containing the various explicit and implicit fights between workers and their adversaries. However, "class struggle" is rather the *Substance* of a science of the workers' movement than its *Concept*. It is too broad and too vague a notion to serve as the starting point of analysis.

I propose the **Strike** as a unit of analysis of/for the development of the workers' movement.²⁵⁶ The Strike is not only an abstract concept, it "*...is itself an existent phenomenon...*"²⁵⁷ Strikes are observable things. They can be joined, supported and repressed. People may have an opinion about the Strike as a form of struggle in general and about a particular strike. As a concept, the Strike "*...is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing... typically a particular genus of some universal...*"²⁵⁸ A work-stoppage is a particular form of protest appropriate to the social situation of wage labor. Workers may wear a silly hat on the floor to protest labor conditions, but in itself this activity of resistance, regardless of its success, does not *practically* confront their predicament *as* wage laborers. As a system of activity a strike "*...exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena*".²⁵⁹ Through the developmental logic of the Strike the proletarian Subject objectifies itself externally in work-stoppages, factory occupations, demonstrations, pamphlets, and slogans, but also interiorizes these mediations "back into itself" via the formation of institutions, aims and demands, and articulations of class consciousness. Lukács remarked that: "*The organisational forms of the proletariat... are real forms of mediation, in which and through which develops and is developed the consciousness that corresponds to the social being of the proletariat.*"²⁶⁰ Trade unionism, workers' control, and workers' democracy are but developed forms of the dynamics present in any strike: "*In this struggle – a veritable civil war – all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop.*"²⁶¹

²⁵⁵ Fantasia 1993: 279.

²⁵⁶ "*The main unit of analysis was... the collective action and mobilization of both sides within a strategic encounter...*"(Fantasia 1993: 280).

²⁵⁷ Blunden 2010: 190.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

²⁶⁰ Lukács 2000: 79. Emphasis in original.

²⁶¹ Marx and Engels 1976: 210-1.

Linda Cooper remarked that workplaces function as a **microcosm** of capitalist relations.²⁶² Even though each instance of the Strike is a very particular phenomenon, tied to discrete workplaces, the relations of exploitation and domination within the workplace are also concrete expressions of the universal logic of capital accumulation. The Strike then acts as a very practical, immanent critique of capitalist relations that has the ability to overcome the workers' fragmented existence and "totalize"²⁶³ them into a social Subject.

In summary, the Strike is the unit of analysis of the workers' movement, which practically and conceptually unfolds the concrete determinations of capitalist exploitation present within the microcosm of the workplace.

Emancipation

The Economic-Corporate Condition

The social situation of development (SSoD) of the workers' movement is both objective and subjective. Whereas capitalist exploitation, domination and alienation constitute objective predicaments for the reproduction and development of workers as human beings, Gramsci explained that the working class also faces the subjective predicament of its economic-corporate condition. The workers' movement historically and logically started from:

...the economic-corporate level: a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer²⁶⁴ by another manufacturer, etc., but the tradesman does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer; in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organize it, but in the case of the wider social group this is not yet so.²⁶⁵

The economic-corporate moment constitutes a predicament for the developing working class, as it fragmentizes the workforce in different workplaces and atomizes proletarian forms of activity and consciousness, enabling the capitalist class to exploit and dominate the workers, and to embed them in its own political

²⁶² Cooper 2005: 203.

²⁶³ See Lukács 2000; Sartre 2004.

²⁶⁴ Note that here "manufacturer" means "industrial worker".

²⁶⁵ Gramsci 1971: 181.

project.²⁶⁶ Within the economic-corporate SSoD the Strike is extremely particularist and remains underdeveloped. Solidarity only occurs within the workplace itself and between workers who share the same, direct interests. Wildcat strikes, luddite actions, and “spontaneity” are the basic forms of mediation between the worker Subject and its antagonists: factory management and the capitalist State.²⁶⁷

However, throughout particular struggles to overcome their SSoD workers establish their own neoformations, which, in turn, initiate a process of unification and transformation of the different spatio-temporal proletarian activity-systems. The Strike becomes universalized through solidarity between different sections of the working class. The activity-system of a particular company expands to the sector, or even the economy at large. Workers recognize their own interests and volition in the actions and demands of their comrades. They gain a concept of their Strike activity and of themselves as a social Subject.

As I discussed before, Vygotsky observed that for each stage of development, one neoformation plays a central part in developing the entire mental structure. The maturation of this specific psychological function (e.g. memory) pushes forward the development of the whole mental structure, and opens up a new SSoD. After this phase, another neoformation takes over the leading developmental role (e.g. calculus).²⁶⁸ Gramsci would point out that the leading neoformation of the economic-corporate SSoD is the development of organic **trade unionism**.²⁶⁹ Trade unionism organizes the workers for the first time as a class, and opens up a new developmental phase: “...that in which consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class – but still in the purely economic field.”²⁷⁰ At this point, the working class is developing itself as a

²⁶⁶ Thomas 2009: 452.

²⁶⁷ The ‘integral State’ is Gramsci’s sublation of the binary opposition of civil society and political society (state in the narrow sense). The integral State is a concept which allows for an analysis of the developed bourgeois state as the mutual interpenetration of ‘political’ and ‘civil’ society within a unitary state-form. (Thomas 2009: 137) While civil society is the ‘ground’ of the State, in bourgeois society the State superimposes itself on civil society. (Ibid. 193)

²⁶⁸ See Vygotsky 1987.

²⁶⁹ I suggest a broad interpretation of “trade unionism” to include any organizational and discursive form which crystallizes workers as a collective economic actor – also including, for example, cooperatives. This echoes Marx’s concept of “combinations” of workers. See: Strikes and Combinations of Workers [Poverty of Philosophy] in Marx and Engels 1976.

²⁷⁰ Gramsci 1971: 181.

national trade unionist force, both in the domain of organization and consciousness. Sam Moore remarked that: *"...the fundamentally conflictual relations between capital and labour within the workplace provide the social basis for an opposition impulse. What is important is the role of the union in translating such impulses into collective activity and a trade union consciousness."*²⁷¹

As both Gramsci and Luxemburg emphasized, the trade union is a structure that defends the workers' interests within the framework of capitalism, and not a transitional form to socialism.²⁷² The trade union's division of the working class by industrial branch and economic sector reflects capitalism's organization of society.²⁷³ In fact, at a certain point in the trajectory of the developing worker Subject, trade unions become themselves obstacles that have to be overcome.²⁷⁴ For example, with regard to the trade unions that emerged after the 25 January Revolution, Hossam al-Hamalawy observed that: *"Unions, at the end of the day, are built to 'improve' the conditions of exploitation, not 'abolish' exploitation once and for all – here is the task of the political party."*²⁷⁵

As a budding social Subject the trade union movement demands political recognition from the capitalist State: *"Already at this juncture the problem of the State is posed – but only in terms of winning politico-juridical equality with the ruling groups: the right is claimed to participate in legislation and administration, even to reform these – but within the existing fundamental structures."*²⁷⁶ In other words, the working class seeks *political* emancipation for itself.

²⁷¹ Moore 2011: 25.

²⁷² See Morton 2007: 82; Thatcher 2007: 32.

²⁷³ Lavalette 2001: 116.

²⁷⁴ However, the character of trade unions differed greatly depending on their historical formation and their actual position within capitalist society. For example, it could be argued that after the Second World War, in Western Europe trade unions were integrated in the Fordist historical bloc: *"Here is the real great danger of a possible labor defeat. The workers have won the bargaining battle, and precisely because of this they can lose the war of the class struggle over an occasionally long historical period."* (Tronti 2005) Similarly, in Nasserist Egypt trade unions were fully subsumed by the State. However, the recent rise of independent trade unions in Egypt, first in a context of dictatorship and a strong public sector, then in a revolutionary situation, possibly increased their capacity to act in a political and counter-hegemonic way.

²⁷⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2012.

²⁷⁶ Gramsci 1971: 181.

Political Emancipation

While it tries to impose itself on civil and political society through its trade unionist forms of organization and consciousness, the working class recognizes itself only as a political Subject through mediation of the bourgeois State. In *The Jewish Question*, Marx explained the incompleteness of the project of *political* emancipation as opposed to *human* emancipation.²⁷⁷ The emancipation of Western society from feudalism was a political, but not a human emancipation. It eliminated the political character of civil society and abolished the particularist nature of politics, by separating the sphere of civil society from political society, and Man as a private individual with particular interests from Man as a citizen of the universal community.²⁷⁸ The abolishment of distinctions between humans on the basis of "...birth, rank, education, and occupation..."²⁷⁹ only took place in the political sphere – in fact, the necessity of their legal eradication acknowledged their continued existence in the civil sphere: "*Far from abolishing these factual distinctions, the state presupposes them in order to exist, it only experiences itself as a political state and asserts its universality in opposition to these elements.*"²⁸⁰

Gramsci developed Marx's concept of bourgeois society. He called the contradictory totality of a historically matured differentiation of civil and political society the **integral State**. Instead of mere "armed bodies of men" the bourgeois State represented a balance between coercion and consent, political and civil society. Against reifying conceptions of the State, he posited the integral State as: "...a form of social relations within which methodological distinctions can be made between the ensemble of 'private' organisms in civil society and that of the state or 'political' society."²⁸¹

Marx argued that political emancipation, i.e. the realization of politico-juridical equality between members of society within the State, was "...certainly a big step forward..." even though it was not "...the last form of general human

²⁷⁷ "It therefore follows that man liberates himself from a restriction through the **medium of the state**, in a **political** way, by transcending this restriction in an **abstract** and **restricted** manner, in a partial manner, in contradistinction with himself. It also follows that when man liberates himself **politically** he does so in a **devious** way, through a **medium**, even though the medium is a **necessary** one." (Marx 1992: 218. Emphasis in original.)

²⁷⁸ Ibid. 232-3.

²⁷⁹ Ibid. 219.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Morton 2007: 89.

emancipation..."²⁸² Even "human rights", as opposed to civil rights, which seemed to supersede the distinction between civil and political society, were still dependent on the political community to be enacted.²⁸³ How then could real, human emancipation be accomplished? Marx answered:

*Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a **species-being** in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognized and organized his **forces propres** as **social forces** so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of **political force**, only then will human emancipation be completed.*²⁸⁴

What does this mean? Firstly, a private individual should "resume the abstract citizen into himself" and "become a species-being". Individuals should become political beings in their everyday civil life as integral parts of a politicized activity-system. Secondly, an individual should recognize his own forces as socially constituted forces and acknowledge his participation in a social Subject with the capacity to act politically.

In the past, the political emancipation of a particular class or part of civil society had resulted in its universal domination over society. The bourgeoisie had emancipated the whole feudal formation, but from its particular perspective as a bourgeois class. Its particular condition – for example as a possessor of wealth but not of noble birth or privilege – was raised as the universal measure for all classes. Nevertheless, in its era of ascent, the bourgeoisie was able to present itself as a progressive force, which advanced the common good of all society.

*No class of civil society can play this role without awakening a moment of enthusiasm in itself and in the masses; a moment in which this class fraternizes and fuses with society in general, becomes identified with it and is experienced and acknowledged as **its universal representative**; a moment in which its claims and rights are truly the rights and claims of society itself and in which it is in reality the heart and head of society. Only in the name of the universal rights of society can a particular class lay claim to universal domination.*

*If the **revolution of a people** and the **emancipation of a particular class** of civil society are to coincide, if **one** class is to stand for the whole of society, then all*

²⁸² Marx 1992: 221.

²⁸³ Ibid. 231.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 234. Emphasis in original.

*the deficiencies of society must be concentrated in another class, one particular class must be the class which gives universal offence, the embodiment of a general limitation; one particular sphere of society must appear as the **notorious crime** of the whole of society, so that the liberation of this sphere appears as universal self-liberation.*²⁸⁵

Marx's analysis anticipated Gramsci's concept of **hegemony**,²⁸⁶ the capacity of a class to lead other factions of civil society and to represent its domination as the general good. However, if the political emancipation of any group of civil society systematically leads to its particularist domination under a universalist guise, is real, universal, human emancipation possible? And if so, why did Marx hail the proletariat as the "chosen" actor to accomplish this feat?

Human Emancipation

In the Ancien Régime, the bourgeoisie emerged as the class most capable of defeating the universal dominance of the aristocracy, and the need for its own emancipation coincided with that of society at large. In a social formation where classes no longer act as political idealists – i.e. where no class is able to offer an ethico-political dimension to its project – the solution lies:

*In the formation of a class with **radical chains**, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to **no particular right** because the wrong it suffers is not a **particular wrong** but **wrong in general**; a sphere of society which can no longer lay claim to a **historical** title, but merely to a **human** one... and finally a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from – and thereby emancipating – all other spheres of society, which is, in a word, the **total loss** of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through **the total redemption of humanity**. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the **proletariat**.*²⁸⁷

For all Marx's criticisms of Hegel's mystifications, his early concept of the proletariat as emancipator in the epoch²⁸⁸ of bourgeois society appears to be

²⁸⁵ Ibid. 254. Emphasis in original.

²⁸⁶ The concept of hegemony is discussed further in the text.

²⁸⁷ Marx 1992: 256. Emphasis in original.

²⁸⁸ *To constitute a new epoch means to determine the passing away of the existing social formation, which has lived beyond itself and is now condemned to a simple 'duration': it means, that is, to radicalize the elements of crisis that have slowly been strengthened and, finally, to promote the advent of a different social*

expressed in rather schematic and abstract terms. Through his engagement with the historical analysis of real classes, for example in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* or *the Civil War in France*, he rendered this notion more concrete.²⁸⁹

In the capitalist mode of production the class of wage laborers holds a unique position. On the one hand, in capitalism, labor power is treated as a commodity, as an object, as a means to produce surplus-value and realize profits on the market. The whole edifice of bourgeois society is based on the exploitation and commodification of labor power. Lukács²⁹⁰ famously argued that the dominance of the commodity relation in the economic domain led to a tendency of “reification” of all social relations and forms in capitalist society. On the other hand, labor power is inseparable from its human bodies. “*Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself,*”²⁹¹ Marx commented. The process itself of the development of bodies of labor power, i.e. wage laborers, into an autonomous, self-directing and self-governing social Subject negates not only the subjugation of workers to capitalists and processes of commodification, but overthrows the whole system of “wage slavery”. Alex Callinicos commented that:

*Wage-labour is demanding more and more from people, whether they are privileged software designers or ultra-exploited migrant workers. If anything, the relationship between capital and wage-labour is becoming more pervasive economically and socially than it was in the past. Consequently the power that workers gain because capital depends on their exploitation remains of central strategic significance to anyone who wants to change the world.*²⁹²

The human emancipation of wage laborers necessitates the abolition of the selling and buying of labor power: of wage labor *tout court*. As wage labor constitutes the kernel of the capitalist mode of production and surplus-extraction, proletarian emancipation abolishes capitalism.²⁹³ In this sense, the *particular* position and

formation, destined to live, for a longer or shorter period, an historically significant and operative life, bearer of real transformations. (Gramsci in Thomas 2009: 153)

²⁸⁹ Bayat 1996: 174; Gramsci 1971: 407.

²⁹⁰ Lukács 2000.

²⁹¹ Marx and Engels 1976: 211.

²⁹² Callinicos 2004.

²⁹³ An estimation of the global number of wage laborers in the mid-1990s put their number at around 700 million, or almost one third of the entire labor force. When non-employed spouses, children, and unemployed and retired workers are added, this number increases to 1.5 to two

suffering of the working class is the germ of the *universal* liberation of humanity from reification.

However, this is a logical and speculative argument – nonetheless derived from the real, historical movement of capital accumulation and proletarianization – which imagines the differentiation of pure bourgeois society in two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In actuality, both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat find themselves in the company of other – pre-capitalist and “modern” – social forms and their Subjectivities. Feudal lords start producing for the world market; through a mobilization of the state apparatus Ancien Régime actors transform their social formation without class intervention of the bourgeoisie; a transnational corporate elite challenges the nationally organized capitalist fractions; et cetera. Conversely, wage laborers are confronted with other subaltern actors in the “economic sphere”, such as peasants, slum dwellers, impoverished “middle classes” and the petty bourgeoisie; in the “gender sphere”, such as women and LGTB movements; in the sphere of the national and “racial” question, such as black and national liberation movements; and in the cultural sphere, such as repressed communities. In his contemporary study of trade union Subjectivities Sam Moore claimed that: “...in arguing for a reassertation of theories of class consciousness... such theories must be able to capture the expression of interests generated not only by race, gender and class, but also by sexuality, disability, ethnicity and age, all, to varying degrees, central to the continual restructuring of capitalism.”²⁹⁴ Even though it could be said that these other subaltern Subjectivities are secondary forms – because, under pressure of the universal processes of reification and exploitation within the framework of global capitalism,²⁹⁵ they cannot but **refract** class positions in their many colored rays²⁹⁶ – for an

million “members” of the modern working class. Whereas in European countries the number of “traditional” industrial workers decreased, in the USA – often labeled the “motor” of the world economy – their number increased from 26 million in 1971 to 31 million in 1998. Regardless, a wage laborer does not have to produce commodities in order to be indispensable for production, profit, and the whole process of capital accumulation. (Harman 2002)

²⁹⁴ Moore 2011: 9.

²⁹⁵ See Morton 2007: 172.

²⁹⁶ “The life histories of activists suggest that an emergent consciousness of changing class relations has not necessarily been superseded by identities based upon other social categories, yet they are inextricably bound and refracted through these categories. In this Marxist theories of consciousness have not been eclipsed by post-modernist notions of identity and remain relevant to any understanding of activism and essential as a basis for change...” (Moore 2011: 171)

emancipatory strategy of the working class this argument is irrelevant, as their existence as particular subalterns in capitalism is real and salient.

In other words, the emancipatory project and development of the working class cannot be but a collaboration between subaltern actors. Although Lenin advanced the notion of the alliance between workers and the peasantry in the context of the Russian Revolution, and Trotsky of the united front in the post-revolutionary era, the concept of subaltern collaboration was most concretely developed by Gramsci in the shape of the **historic(al) bloc**, which grasps the collaborative Project of two or more classes in all of its economic, political, and cultural determinations.

The Modern Prince

Adam D. Morton lucidly explained that Gramsci's concept of historical bloc entails two dimensions. Firstly, it points to a certain "vertical" coherent ensemble, a *Gestalt* of infrastructural and superstructural elements. The historical bloc represents the "...necessary reciprocity' between the social relations of production and ideas within the realm of state-civil society relations..."²⁹⁷ For example, "Fordism" could be conceived of as a historical bloc as it expressed a capitalist accumulation strategy,²⁹⁸ the totality of economic relations, in the workplace and its ideological, legal and political expressions.

Secondly, the concept of historical bloc represented a "horizontal" process of forging a collaborative activity-system or Project between classes: "...various social-class forces with competing and heterogeneous interests had to be fused to bring about at least some kind of unity in aims and beliefs. A historical bloc therefore indicates the integration of a variety of different class interests and forms of identity within a 'national-popular' alliance."²⁹⁹ The formation of a historical bloc, is not an optional branch in the development of the worker Subject, but a necessary moment wherein: "...one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too."³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Morton 2007: 96.

²⁹⁸ "An accumulation strategy defines a specific economic 'growth model', including the various extra-economic preconditions and general strategies appropriate for its realisation." Ibid. 153.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. 96-7.

³⁰⁰ Gramsci 1971: 181.

Gramsci conceptualized the “mode of collaboration” between classes in a historical bloc as relations of **hegemony**. Class alliances do not construct an amorphous “multitude” of actors, but a coherent whole in which one social Subject plays a directive role.³⁰¹ The Italian Marxist expanded Lenin’s concept of hegemony, which had defined the relation between the proletariat and the peasantry in their collaborative Project against Czarism as one where workers, because of their capacities as a social Subject, played a directive role.³⁰² Whereas for Lenin the notion of hegemony served as a category in the analysis of proletarian strategy, for Gramsci it became a key concept in the theory of the State.

As discussed above, the development of modern, bourgeois society contained the differentiation of civil and political society – i.e. the constitution of the integral State – as the playfield of a historical bloc. Within civil and political society, the class rule of the bourgeoisie was based on both *domination* and *hegemony*. Whereas domination is “naked” and “top-down” class rule, whereby the ruled is the *passive* Object of the integral State, hegemony is the *active* acceptance of the bourgeoisie’s class leadership by other social groups because of its prestige, its directive capacities, its cultural aura, its ability to “manage” society and resolve societal problems, et cetera. Even though “domination” and “hegemony” stand in opposition to each other, rather than excluding each other these concepts are complementary. For the working class, domination is the *objective* and hegemony the *subjective* moment of its condition of subalternity in bourgeois society. Bourgeois law, for example, subjugates the subaltern Subjects as well as offering them a means to recognize their own Subjectivity in a colonizing way. For the bourgeoisie, hegemony is its capacity to present itself as a progressive and leading force in society and to represent its own particular interests as the general good. The actors who organize the hegemony of a class are its organic intellectuals and fellow travelers.³⁰³

Hegemony is secured through the development of a **hegemonic apparatus**: “...the wide-ranging series of articulated institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices – from newspapers to educational organizations to political parties – by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political

³⁰¹ Harman 2002.

³⁰² Morton 2007: 88; Townshend 1996: 245.

³⁰³ Gramsci 1996: 93.

power.”³⁰⁴ This hegemonic apparatus is the material glue which keeps a historical bloc together.

As a concept, hegemony can be applied both to bourgeois and proletarian class rule, but, even though the nature of their leadership shares the same form, their content differs qualitatively. Just as in the case of the bourgeoisie, the self-emancipation of the working class does not only require the realization of its domination over the previously ruling classes by a conquest of political society – i.e. the classic notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” or the Trotskyite concept of “workers’ democracy” – but also the formation of a subaltern “counter-bloc”³⁰⁵ and its hegemony in civil and political society:

*The metal worker, the carpenter, the builder, etc., must not only think as proletarians and no longer as metal worker, carpenter, builder, etc., but they have to take one more step forward: they have to think like workers who are members of a class that aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals. They have to think like a class which can win and build socialism only if it is helped and followed by the large majority of these social strata. If this is not achieved, the proletariat does not become the leading class...*³⁰⁶

Yet, whereas bourgeois hegemony is exercised “from above” through technocratic and bureaucratic methods and “coercive consent”, proletarian hegemony should be based on a dialectical pedagogy “from below”: a continuous organic exchange between intellectuals and the masses; between revolutionary theory and good sense; and between workers and their subaltern allies.³⁰⁷ For Gramsci, the archetype of this dialectical pedagogy had been the praxis of the Factory Councils during the *biennio rosso* – the two years of intense class struggle in Italy after the First World War. Against the top-down bureaucratism of the trade unions, the intellectuals around *L’Ordine Nuovo* developed a concept of grassroots and democratic worker participation, which emerged organically from

³⁰⁴ Thomas 2009: 226.

³⁰⁵ Unlike Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s “multitude”, Gramsci’s counter-bloc is not the dissolution of the working class in a collection of subaltern actors who resist the “rule of capital”. (Callinicos 2004) On the contrary, the formation of the counter-bloc affirms the proletariat as the counter-hegemonic class able to defeat the bourgeoisie. One could say that it is through the constitution of a counter-bloc that the working class finally gains a concept of itself as a directive, political actor.

³⁰⁶ Gramsci 2005: 41.

³⁰⁷ Thomas 2009: 437-8.

their solidary assistance to the “spontaneous” Factory Councils. The dissipation of the revolutionary movement in Italy, on the one hand, and the Stalinist Thermidor³⁰⁸ on the other, convinced Gramsci that the immanent democratic dynamic of the workers’ movement needed a directive center in order to be successful, and, conversely, that this directive center needed a continuous organic connection to the worker activity-system.³⁰⁹

With a nod to Machiavelli, Gramsci called this reciprocal relation between proletarian authority and democracy, organization and spontaneity, the **Modern Prince**: “...the fusion of a new type of political party and oppositional culture that would gather together intellectuals (organizers) and the masses in a new political and intellectual practice...”³¹⁰ The Modern Prince is much more than the institutionalization and concentration of the workers’ movement in a “parliamentary” party or “vanguard” organization. It is the formation of a directive “collective intellectual”, a hegemonic apparatus, a critical and emancipatory practice, and a system of activity, governed by a dialectic pedagogy. In this sense, proletarian hegemony offers its subaltern allies rather a means of emancipatory mediation than traditional class rule. If “trade unionism” is the *Gestalt* of neoformations that liberate the workers’ movement from its economic-corporate condition, the constitution of the Modern Prince in turn overcomes the objective and subjective predicament of the trade unionist SSoD. Gramsci called this human emancipation a “catharsis”:

*...the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment... Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives.*³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Thermidor was the eleventh month of the revolutionary French calendar. As Robespierre was overthrown in the month Thermidor, the term came to denote the moment in which the development of a revolution halted, and reaction took the upper hand. In a 1931 essay in the first edition of *Class Struggle*, Trotsky described the rise of Stalinism in Soviet Russia as the Thermidor of the Russian Revolution.

³⁰⁹ Morton 2007: 82-5.

³¹⁰ Thomas, 2009: 437.

³¹¹ Gramsci 1971: 366-7.

Lines of Development

Movement and Position

Gramsci did not conceive of his conceptual development of the worker Subject as a straightforward, linear, and historical “scheme”:

In real history these moments imply each other reciprocally – horizontally and vertically, so to speak – i.e. according to socio-economic activity (horizontally) and to country (vertically), combining and diverging in various ways... international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations.³¹²

Furthermore, the tempo and form of the class struggle may vary depending on the SSoD in which the nascent proletariat finds itself. Gramsci distinguished between “war of position”, “war of maneuver” and “underground warfare”.³¹³ Depending on the strength of bourgeois hegemony and the coherence of the integral State the battle for proletarian hegemony takes on different shapes. Gramsci observed that:

...in the case of the most advanced States... ‘civil society’ has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic ‘incursions’ of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)...³¹⁴

The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State [=political society] organizations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the “trenches” and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely “partial” the element of movement which before use to be “the whole” of war, etc.³¹⁵

This was a slight, yet critical, nod of appreciation towards the “reformist” strategy of Western European socialist parties such as the SPD, and its “battle of democracy”. Conversely, Gramsci argued that in countries where the integral State – i.e. the totality of civil and political society – is less coherent, both in its ideal and material objectifications, and the State apparatus appears to be “everything” – such as in Russia at the eve of the 1917 Revolution,³¹⁶ or in the

³¹² Ibid. 182.

³¹³ Ibid. 229.

³¹⁴ Ibid. 235.

³¹⁵ Ibid. 243.

³¹⁶ Ibid. 218.

colonial nations³¹⁷ – a war of movement or “frontal attack” on State power is both possible and necessary. In nations where the integral State is fully matured, it is much more difficult to conquer State power in one “moment” of mobilization. Still, even in developed bourgeois formations the art of politics requires a critical and creative appreciation of the “moment”, as Lukács explained:

*What is a ‘moment’? A situation whose duration may be longer or shorter, but which is distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process, and demands that a **decision** be taken over the **future direction of the process**. That is to say the tendencies reach a sort of zenith, and depending on how the situation concerned is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the ‘moment’. Development does not occur, then, as a continuous intensification, in which development is favourable to the proletariat, and the day after tomorrow the situation must be even more favourable than it is tomorrow, and so on. It means rather that at a **particular point**, the situation demands that a decision be taken and the day after tomorrow might be too late to make that decision.³¹⁸*

There is a parallel between Vygotsky’s understanding of the impact of the SSoD on the tempo and form of ontogenesis and Gramsci’s and Lukács’s appreciation of the rhythm of proletarian sociogenesis. According to Vygotsky, during “stable” periods of development, the capacities of the Subject gradually mature, slowly opening up a new SSoD. However, situations of ontogenetic “crisis” signify a rupture with the existing social condition, calling into being “transitional neoformations”, and abruptly creating a new SSoD.³¹⁹ Transferring this insight to the process of sociogenesis, it becomes clear that the gradual development of the workers’ movement – characterized by the leading neoformations of trade unions, cooperatives, electoral parties, et cetera, which flowed from the maturation of the Strike – was alternated by moments of revolutionary crisis, in which the line of development became the “Mass Strike”, and in which neoformations such as workers’ councils and committees took on a central role.

Revolution and the Mass Strike

In her 1906 booklet “The Mass Strike”, Rosa Luxemburg explained the developmental logic of the mass strike within the context of revolution.

³¹⁷ Ibid. 243.

³¹⁸ Lukács 2000: 55.

³¹⁹ Blunden 2011; Vygotsky 1987: 194-8.

Luxemburg argued that a revolution was a process, rather than an event, dictated by the ebb and flow of mass political and economic protests. The clash with the armed bodies of the State and the conquest of State power was “...in the revolution today only the culminating point, only a moment on the process of the proletarian mass struggle.”³²⁰ Within this process of mass mobilization, the mass Strike is “...the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.”³²¹ The mass Strike is an expanded shape of the Strike, called into existence when the broad activity of the class struggle takes the form of a “war of movement”: “Only in the sultry air of the period of revolution can any partial little conflict between labor and capital grow into a general explosion.”³²² Luxemburg also conceived of the mass Strike as an instructive process that stimulates: “...the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle.”³²³ To this Mario Tronti added that:

*...the Massenstreik always ends up as an event for the movement not directly connected with the class. It takes on a class character only when the labor struggle assumes mass dimensions and the concrete Concept of laboring masses in struggle is born in real social relations rather than merely in the sacred texts of the ideology. Here the concept of mass is not in the quantitative accumulation of many individual units under the same condition of the so-called exploitation... Here it is a matter of a process of massification of the working class. It is a process of class growth of the workers and of internal homogenization of industrial labor power... There is no possible process of class other massification without first having reached a mass level of struggle. In words, there is no true class growth of the workers without mass labor struggle.*³²⁴

Luxemburg would have agreed with Gramsci that absolutist states such as czarist Russia were more prone to the “war of movement”: in absolutist Russia: “...in which every form and expression of the labor movement is forbidden, in which the simplest strike is a political crime, it must logically follow that every economic struggle will become a political one.”³²⁵ Even though the Mass Strike “...is rather the indication,

³²⁰ Luxemburg 1970: 220.

³²¹ Ibid. 182.

³²² Ibid. 186.

³²³ Ibid. 176.

³²⁴ Tronti 2005.

³²⁵ Luxemburg 1970: 190.

the rallying idea, of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades,"³²⁶ within this epoch there is no slow and gradual development of trade unionism and the Modern Prince. The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 prompted the creation of soviets – workers' and soldiers' councils – as sudden neoformations of the workers' movement, which at once combined the "trade unionist" and "hegemonic" moments.³²⁷ The struggle is:

*...directed as much against the old state power as against capitalist exploitation, [in which] the mass strike appears as the natural means of recruiting the widest proletarian layers for the struggle, as well as being at the same time a means to undermining and overthrowing the old state power, and of stemming capitalist exploitation.*³²⁸

In a word: the economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle. Cause and effect here continually change places...³²⁹

Adam Hanieh implicitly acknowledged the validity of the mass Strike as a concept to understand the Egyptian workers' "war of movement" vis-à-vis the Mubarak regime:

*These questions are neither solely 'political' nor 'economic' but revolve primarily around which class rules Egypt and in whose interest the Egyptian state functions. The nature of Mubarak's rule cannot be separated from these questions, which is why the struggle against political despotism is inevitably intertwined with the dynamic of class struggle.*³³⁰

Further in the text, I argue that the neoliberal transformation of Egypt's accumulation strategy in the 1990s led to a disintegration of hegemony and the existing historical bloc, setting the scene for a revolutionary period. The organic

³²⁶ Ibid. 182.

³²⁷ *Organizing themselves into soviets, the workers spontaneously reorganized the space of political life: opening the process of political decision-making to the scrutiny of the popular masses, they encouraged the masses to enter politics; merging the social, economic and cultural demands and grievances of the people in the assault upon the autocratic regime, they palpably expanded the range of political struggle; dispensing with formalities that barred the path to participation in the struggle, they facilitated the confluence of popular forces in all their contradictory diversity.* (Shandro 2007: 18)

³²⁸ Luxemburg 1970: 202.

³²⁹ Ibid. 185. Emphasis in original.

³³⁰ Hanieh 2011.

crisis of the Egyptian system constituted a predicament for the workers, and the developing activity-system of mass strikes, anticipated by the Mahalla movement, and continuously expanding since the fall of Mubarak, was their attempt to “solve” their problems by overcoming their economic-corporate condition. However, on the trajectory of the Strike, moving from the “economic” to the “political” moment, workers do not only transform their SSoD, but also develop themselves as a social Subject.³³¹ By organizing strikes, establishing committees, chanting slogans, creating songs, cartoons, and poems of revolt, et cetera, the workers’ movement acquires Subjectness: organizational coherence; a concept and theory of itself as a collective agent; and an immanent rationale and goal that are likely different from its original objectives (for example a defense of basic livelihoods).

³³¹ This is, in fact, the case for any social movement. See Johnson 2001: 113-4.

PART II
***Development of the
Egyptian Workers' Movement***

Introduction

The thing is: The way I see it, these days there's a war on, right? And, ages ago, there wasn't a war on, right? So, there must have been a moment when there not being a war on went away, right? and there being a war on came along. So, what I want to know is: How did we get from the one case of affairs to the other case of affairs?
"Baldrick" in *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989)

The Concept of Transition

Gramsci explained that the study of the formation of subaltern classes in general, and the proletariat in particular, required two dimensions. Firstly, the transformations in the objective and subjective predicament of the working class "in-itself" should be investigated, i.e. both the changing position of workers within the economic structure and the movement of their mentalities towards and consent to the rule of the capitalist classes. Secondly, the neoformations that emerge from the working class itself, should be studied in their capacity as movements towards self-determination.³³²

A concept of the development of the workers' movement thus requires a concept of capitalism as a historical process. As a premise, we could probably agree upon the simple observation that "capitalism" hasn't always been around, and that society, on a global scale, has been transformed in rapid and qualitative ways since, at least, the last two centuries.³³³ History is not a smooth and linear process, as Gramsci, who wrote about the particular case of the Italian *Risorgimento*,³³⁴ all too well understood. The asynchronous historical-geographical development of the capitalist mode of production and the world market poses the conceptual problem of how capitalism "came into being", and how, from that moment on, pre-capitalist societies and modes of production related to their capitalist counterparts and to the emerging world economy as a whole. The question of "how did we get from the one case of affairs to the other case of affairs" has spawned an expansive field of literature and debates, which I won't review here. Instead, I discuss three broad approaches to an understanding of the concept of

³³² Morton 2007: 62.

³³³ Unless you equate "capitalism" simply with "trade" – in which case you end up with bizarre constructions such as a 5,000 year old world system. For an example, see Frank and Gills 1994.

³³⁴The movement for Italian political unity between 1815 and 1871.

capitalist transition within Marxist and heterodox thought: stage theory; dependency theory; and the theory of uneven and combined development.

In general, Marxists of the Second and Third International considered the nation state as the primary frame of economic analysis. As non-Western countries lacked the necessary material and social conditions for socialism, they first had to develop their forces of production. A slavish reading of Marx led to the belief that capitalism as an economic “stage” could not be skipped: *“The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future... One nation can and should learn from others... society... can neither leap over the natural phases of its development nor remove them by decree.”*³³⁵ Non-capitalist countries should experience a transition identical to the West, consisting of a national-democratic revolution that would destroy feudalism, establish a parliamentary democracy, promote free trade and markets, defend private property and civil rights, and protect the nation’s sovereignty. The historical agent of the national-democratic revolution was the industrial bourgeoisie. Consequently, in pre-capitalist social formations, subaltern classes had to support “their” nascent ruling class against imperialism, colonialism, and feudalism.

Stage theory became the dominant transitology model for the Second International and the Comintern.³³⁶ Ironically this view echoed capitalist modernization theory, which, especially through the works of Walt Rostow³³⁷ and Samuel Huntington³³⁸, conceived of “development” as a gradual and linear transition from a “traditional” to a “modern” society. Backward states had to emulate the historical development of capitalism in Western European countries in order to develop their economies. Some authors such as Bill Warren³³⁹ even claimed that imperialism and colonialism were progressive forces that emancipated the so-called Third World countries from their pre-capitalist and traditional social formations.

Against the backdrop of the decolonization movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Marxist scholars discussed the nature of development – or rather the lack thereof – in colonial and postcolonial states. Roughly two explanations were

³³⁵ Marx 1990: 91–2.

³³⁶ Attewel 1984: 215–16; Townshend 1996: 143.

³³⁷ See Rostow 1960.

³³⁸ See Huntington 1991.

³³⁹ See Warren 1973.

offered. A first trend of thought moved that Third World countries suffered a “blocked transition” towards (full) capitalism because of the dominance of domestic elites, such as merchant capitalists and landlords, who were unwilling and/or unable to industrialize their economies. This was in opposition to Friedrich Engels’ notion of “...the *passive survival of antiquated modes of production...*”³⁴⁰ The concept of “blocked transition” enabled a critique of colonialism and imperialism – which supported domestic pre-capitalist forces – while, at the same time, it reinforced the “stagist” idea that the fundamental problem of underdevelopment was “too little” capitalism.

The dependency school initiated a paradigm-shift by conceiving of the world capitalist system, and not the nation state, as the primary frame of analysis. One should not look for the causes of underdevelopment and backwardness at the level of the nation state, but by analyzing the structural position of underdeveloped nations in the world capitalist system. Raul Prebisch and Hans Singer laid the foundations of “dependency theory”, which was elaborated upon by authors such as Paul Baran³⁴¹. Samir Amin³⁴² saw the distorted development of the Third World as a form of capitalism in its own right: a peripheral capitalism that differed fundamentally from the capitalism found in the core countries. Andre Gunder Frank³⁴³ rejected the notion of one type of capitalism in the periphery and another in the core; according to him there was only one capitalist system, which dominated the globe and which determined all social forms and modes of production as “capitalist”. Immanuel Wallerstein³⁴⁴ developed Frank’s concept of a single system determining the nature of its parts into world-system analysis.

While dependency theory and world-system analysis paid attention to the dynamics of capitalism as a totality, this tradition suffered from functionalism and reductionism, neglecting the role of class struggle, modes of production, labor exploitation, and pre-capitalist structures in defining capitalist reality.³⁴⁵ In their paradigm, the self-motion of capitalism structures the totality according to

³⁴⁰ Even though they brought with them an “...inevitable train of social and political anachronisms...” (Marx and Engels 1990: 437)

³⁴¹ See Baran 1957.

³⁴² See Amin 1976.

³⁴³ Frank 1969.

³⁴⁴ Wallerstein 1974.

³⁴⁵ Chilcote 1981: 4-5.

its own needs.³⁴⁶ *Pace* Frank and Wallerstein, Ernesto Laclau³⁴⁷ argued that capitalism is not a homogenous system, but a differentiated totality, comprising pre-capitalist modes of production that are embedded within the larger capitalist structure.³⁴⁸

The chief methodological problem of both the “nation state” and “world-system” approaches was that they **reduced** the development of the whole to the movement of the particular parts, or vice versa.³⁴⁹ Trotsky’s concept of uneven and combined development (U&CD),³⁵⁰ critically appropriated by Gramsci,³⁵¹ elaborated upon by Mandel³⁵² and more recently by authors such as Rosenberg,³⁵³ might be the key to an understanding of (under)development based on the dialectic between totality and locality, and between capitalist and pre-capitalist forms.

Uneven and Combined Development

Although some elements of U&CD had already been expressed by Marx, Hilferding, and Pannekoek,³⁵⁴ it was Trotsky who elaborated the theory in the introductory chapter of the History of the Russian Revolution.³⁵⁵ In his view, history is a progressive sequence of modes of production, but with the arrival of capitalism the development of productive forces acquires a systemic *uneven* and *combined* character. The qualitative difference between the productive forces that capitalism unleashes and their pre-capitalist counterparts creates a deep dichotomy – “unevenness” – between “advanced” and “backward” forms. However, nations, institutions, people, et cetera, do not exist in isolation from each other; on the contrary, through the world market capitalism universalizes itself, connecting different national, regional, and local activity systems with each other. Advanced and backward social forms and modes of production are found

³⁴⁶ Chevalier 1982.

³⁴⁷ Laclau 1977.

³⁴⁸ Foster-Carter 1978: 47-51.

³⁴⁹ Allison and Anievas 2010: 47-8.

³⁵⁰ Trotsky 2001.

³⁵¹ Morton 2007.

³⁵² Mandel 1976.

³⁵³ Rosenberg 2009 and Rosenberg 2010.

³⁵⁴ Van der Linden 2007: 146.

³⁵⁵ Trotsky 2001.

“in combination”; they become part of the same totality without losing their separate identity. At this point “stagism” becomes irrelevant because development is perceived as an organic process of both the whole – the world market, the internationalization of capital, imperialism, et cetera – and its parts – states, regions, specific modes of production, et cetera. Through their relation with the world market, backward nations can directly appropriate advanced forms without going through all the historical steps that the advanced country experienced to get there. This “privilege of backwardness” is only a potentiality; sometimes more advanced forms are debased when they are embedded in a backward context, which paradoxically leads to a strengthening of these backwards conditions instead of revolutionizing them.³⁵⁶

In some specific historical cases – for example the development of Germany and the USA – backwardness proved indeed to be an advantage. Most non-industrialized societies, however, missed the advent of the capitalist mode of production and were confronted with strong capitalist nations. Mandel argued that the rise of imperialism and the expansion of the world market blocked the possibility for non-industrialized countries to develop along the same lines and at the same tempo as the first industrial nations.³⁵⁷ To them the capitalist mode of production was introduced through exchange (world market) and force (colonialism and imperialism) and it confronted, assimilated, appropriated, and destroyed pre-capitalist structures. Whilst the integration of non-capitalist spaces into the capitalist totality furthered the development of the whole – the accumulation of capital on a world level – it did not automatically develop the parts evenly. In opposition to dependency theory, one could argue that the economic trajectories of the periphery are not merely “blocked” by its structural relations with the core capitalist countries. Instead, “transition” and “development” in capitalism encompass the interpenetration of global relations of production and exchange with national social formations, resulting in specific “domestic” combinations of modes of production.

The framework of U&CD takes as its methodological “nodal point”³⁵⁸ the “national” social formation, which is a crystallization of the interpenetration of

³⁵⁶ Allinson and Anievas 2010: 50-2, 61; Ashman 2009: 31; Trotsky 2001: 25-37; Van der Linden 2007: 147-9.

³⁵⁷ Van der Linden 2007: 150-1.

³⁵⁸ See Morton 2007.

intra-national, *inter*-national, and *trans*-national social forms and forces. Unevenness determined the combined nature of the social formation in the Third World countries, and this combination in turn often frustrated “indigenous” attempts at capital accumulation and development. The historical blocs that emerged in the Third World – in the sense of both the articulations between infrastructures and superstructures, and the shapes of the class alliances – also refracted the uneven and combined development of global capitalism. “Hybrid” pre-capitalist *cum* colonial social forms were not aberrations of the trajectory of modern development, nor “pure” capitalist forms in themselves, but the concrete spatio-temporal expressions of the encounter between domestic, foreign, and global social and material forces.

The Egyptian Social Formation

In the following chapters, I develop an image of the trajectory of the modern Egyptian social formation. My aim is not to rewrite the history of the Egyptian workers’ movement,³⁵⁹ but to sketch in broad lines the trajectory of the worker Subject and its interaction with the Left and other “assisting” forces.³⁶⁰ This excursus elucidates the position and importance of the 2000s civil-democratic and class movements as moments within a historical chain of emancipatory processes. Moreover, certain contemporary forms of Subjectivity, political Projects, and modes of assistance are firmly rooted in the past – in the shape of organizations, memories, texts, and other forms of objectification, which continue to mediate thoughts and activities in the present.

The chapter on *The Pre-Capitalist Formation* sets the scene for the violent introduction of the capitalist mode of production by the British colonial intervention. In the first phase of integration of Egypt in the capitalist world market, which lasted from the second half of the eighteenth century until the first half of the nineteenth century, Western advanced production methods and relations were absorbed by the absolutist state without qualitatively affecting the

³⁵⁹ Apart from a few interview excerpts, I have used secondary sources for this historical exposé. Much of the “economic” narrative is derived from a joint paper I have written with Jelle Versieren on the historical contradictions of accumulation and development in Egypt.

³⁶⁰ Although, from time to time, I highlight the international and global dimensions of the development of the Egyptian social formation, my focus is primarily on domestic dynamics.

existing social formation. At this point there was no development towards a modern working class.

In *Colonialism*, I argue that the colonial State both introduced and blocked the capitalist mode of production. Whereas its reliance on feudalistic landlords continued Egypt's uneven development vis-à-vis the European powers, its introduction of modern services, communication, industries, et cetera, also "combined" the pre-capitalist social forms in the urban centers with advanced capitalist relations and techniques. The three colonial decades saw the emergence of a historical bloc between, chiefly, British capitalists and Egyptian landlords – dominated by the former. The colonial mode of production also organically created new layers of modern wage laborers and intellectuals, which, however, did not automatically replace the traditional "artisanat" and intellectuals. Capitalist exploitation and colonial dependence interpellated the formation of an anti-colonial bloc, which gathered subaltern actors such as fledgling trade unions, as well as landlords and domestic industrialists – united in their resistance against foreign domination. The 1919 Revolution did not resolve Egypt's fundamental political and economic problems.

The chapter *Neo-Colonialism* discusses the differentiation of the anti-colonial bloc. After the 1919 Revolution, domestic ruling classes somewhat redressed the balance of power between them and foreign capital in the existing bloc. The Egyptian State was formally emancipated from colonialism, but British capital continued to dominate the formation directly through its military presence in Suez, and indirectly through the Palace. Domestic capitalists tried to initiate projects of "independent" or "national capitalist" development, but they could not fundamentally separate their class interests from those of landed and foreign capital. Meanwhile, the subsumption of the working class under the nationalist counter-bloc was challenged by an increasingly independent trade union movement. However, from a political perspective, the worker Subject continued to be "colonized" by nationalist, Islamist, and communist forces. After the Second World War, neither the ruling bloc or its anti-colonial contenders were able to assert themselves as a hegemonic force, thereby creating the moment for Nasserism.

The nature of the Free Officers' coup and the subsequent societal transformations are dealt with in *Nasserism*. I deploy Gramsci's concept of

“Caesarism” to understand the Nasserist intervention as a qualitative and progressive form of Bonapartism. Whilst Nasserism improved the social and economic conditions of the working class, from the perspective of “proletarian sociogenesis”, Caesarist “colonization” refragmented the workers back into an economic-corporate state. Moreover, the contingent development of Nasserist state capitalism did not eradicate, but merely suppressed the rule of domestic and foreign ruling classes. Landlords were not fully expropriated, and private capitalists were able to extend their “life form” through commercial and subcontracting activities. Conversely, state elites increasingly behaved as a private ruling class in its own right.

The resurgence of these groups and their capture of State power are the subject matter of *Sadat's Passive Revolution*. The crisis of Nasserism, especially after the Six Day War of 1967, necessitated a reorientation of the strategies for accumulation and hegemony. I advance an understanding of Sadat's political and economic transformations from above as a “passive revolution”, in the Gramscian sense. Sadat created a new, neoliberal ruling bloc that expressed the interests of domestic and foreign capitalist actors. Sadat's *Infitah* coincided with a global passive revolution of capital in which the Fordist historical bloc was transformed. The neoliberal bloc was contested by workers and other subaltern groups such as students. Even though these groups did not succeed in creating a coherent counter-hegemonic bloc, the spontaneous uprising of 1977 temporarily froze the neoliberal passive revolution. The consolidation of a “rentier economy” offered the State sufficient economic oxygen to postpone its debt crisis, and to continue its redistributive and clientelist practices.

I explain in *Mubarak's Détente* how the new President domesticated the Left by a superficial “democratization from above”, and how the workers' movement, despite some militant strikes, remained entangled in its economic-corporate condition. The collapse of the rentier economy imposed a return to the aggressive neoliberal strategy for accumulation, which, in turn, forced a reconfiguration of the ruling bloc and an increasingly violent coercion of subaltern groups and their exclusion from civil and political society. The passive revolution returned to its “offensive” moment, interpellating civil-democratic and class movements from below. The transformations of the 1990s and 2000s are discussed in *Part III Against the Pharaoh*.

CHAPTER 5

The Pre-Capitalist Formation

...instead of a working class advancing rights, we find loyal subjects seeking order and government regulation.

John T. Chalcraft (2001: 122)

What Came Before

Before I investigate Egypt's historical rendezvous with capitalism, I sketch, in broad lines, its pre-capitalist social formation, revealing the terrain of the societal transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Egypt, as a part of the Ottoman Empire, is represented in Marx's and Engels's writings as part of "Asia" or the "East": a cultural-geographic entity with distinct politico-economic features. Ecological and geographical aspects of the region necessitated State-led and centralized irrigation, which, in collaboration with the predominance of a bureaucratic state vis-à-vis small, autarchic village communities, led to "oriental despotism"; there was no private property as the State, personified by the despot, was the only legal property owner. The fusion of agriculture and handicraft in the villages rendered these units economically autonomous, impeding mobility and communication between rural units. Surplus extraction was realized centrally, by the despotic State, through forced labor or tribute.

Marx's and Engels's conception of pre-capitalist societies was schematic at best, and, to a large extent, informed by the Orientalist worldviews of the scholars of their time: Adam Smith, François Bernier, Herder, Leopold von Ranke, John Stuart Mill, and of course Hegel. The ideological concept of a static, homogeneous "East" and its specific mode of production did not conform to the diversity of social forms found in the lands labeled as "Asiatic".³⁶¹

However, the notion of centrally organized surplus-extraction gave birth to the less Orientalist concept of "tributary mode of production", which accentuated the character and the role of the State in the mode of surplus-extraction of pre-capitalist political economies.³⁶² The social formation in the Ottoman Empire until

³⁶¹ Anderson 1974: 548; Fogel 1988: 57; Jorgenson 1995: 327-31; Jun 1995: 336-9; McFarlane et alii. 2005: 89-290.

³⁶² See Davidson 2004.

the nineteenth century can be roughly defined as a tributary system with feudalistic trends.³⁶³ Agricultural production was, in general, organized by the *çift-hane* system: a peasant household gained the usufruct of state lands and surplus appropriation was enforced by a land tax as a percentage of the crops.³⁶⁴ Surpluses were not reinvested in agricultural production, but flowed directly to the cities, which became rich centers of trade, guild handicrafts, and state administration.³⁶⁵

By the eighteenth century the establishment of large farms and the weakening of Ottoman state power reinforced the power of landlords and regional governors in Egypt.³⁶⁶ Mamluk households dominated Egypt's agrarian production. Although the Mamluks were tax farmers, they enjoyed a relative fiscal and political independence from the Ottoman state. In Egypt the agricultural surplus was much higher than subsistence levels because of favorable natural and geographical conditions, which stimulated production for regional and international markets. Farmers worked their own plots for subsistence, whereas the surplus product was extracted through taxation and extra labor was expropriated through sharecropping, *corvée* and wage labor.³⁶⁷ The increase of large landholdings, low agricultural prices, and the expansion of European markets between the 1740s and 1815 intensified trade relations between the Ottoman Empire and the West, incorporating Egypt in the developing world capitalist market. The blossoming world trade realized large profits for the rural elites, stimulating a new urban financial sphere of credit, loans and banking around landed property, often exploited by religious minorities that could ignore Islamic sensitivities towards usury and interest. This new commercial domain gave rise to a merchant-capitalist class in the cities.³⁶⁸

³⁶³ "... the Egyptian social formation of the early nineteenth century when the tributary mode of production was dominant..." (Chaichian 1988: 25)

³⁶⁴ Beinlin 2001: 13.

³⁶⁵ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 39.

³⁶⁶ Cuno 2005: 197.

³⁶⁷ Beinlin 2001: 25; Tucker 2005: 230. Khafaji however downplays the role of wage labor, because "temporary or informal labor force only complimented the enserfed labor power during the seasons of high demand for workforce, like harvest. The migrant or informal labor force was not composed of the landless, but of peasant families whose possessions of land were no longer sufficient for their survival." Khafaji 2004: 32.

³⁶⁸ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 38-40.

The urban workforce was classified and organized according to the specific handicraft, commercial activity, service, or trade in which the laborers were employed. Their organization was the *ta'ifa* (*tawa'if*), which “vertically” gathered the productive forces relevant to a particular profession.³⁶⁹ Alongside these professional groups existed a “...stratum of more or less unskilled, propertyless workers who took whatever short-term jobs were available and were not identified with any specific craft.”³⁷⁰ However, these subproletarians were subsumed as a social group under the category of the “poor” or the “needy”.³⁷¹

Muhammad Ali

Aside from the expansion of the world market, modern geopolitics stimulated the penetration of capitalist forms in non-capitalist countries. Military confrontations with the rising European powers forced the Ottoman Empire and its provincial rulers to raise revenues in order to modernize and expand their armies. At the end of the eighteenth century the Mamluk chief Murad Bey imposed a state monopoly on customs collection and the government purchased and resold a large part of the wheat crop to pay for its military expenditures. This move anticipated the policies of Muhammad Ali who defeated the French – who occupied Egypt between 1798-1801 – the Ottomans, and the old Mamluk elite.

As the new Pasha was beleaguered by both the West and his former Ottoman suzerain, he continued Bey’s attempt at building a modern army, whilst pursuing a mercantilist policy. In order to gain fiscal autonomy from the landed elite, he partially adopted the reform program of the French who had seized tax farms, nationalized agricultural lands, and supervised guilds. In 1814 tax farming was abolished. The reassertion of central state power temporarily blocked the development of tax farmers into private landholders.³⁷² Peasants kept the usufruct of their lands, but were obliged to sell their crops directly to the state at low, set prices. This monopsony allowed the government to trade agricultural produce with a large profit margin on both local and international markets. Protectionist measures safeguarded the weak Egyptian industries – primarily textile and weapon manufacturing – against competition with Western capitalist countries.

³⁶⁹ Lockman 1996: 78.

³⁷⁰ Ibid. 79.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Cuno 2005: 198.

Attempts were made at substituting Western commodities with Egyptian products, anticipating the import-substitution-industrialization (ISI) policies of the later neo-colonial and post-colonial State. Through forced conscription wage laborers were recruited among the peasants and guild artisans.³⁷³

Muhammad Ali's centralized fiscal, mercantilist, and industrial policies were primarily oriented towards the needs of the military and the bureaucracy, curtailing the power of urban guilds and merchant capital. Rather than a development towards "indigenous capitalism", Ali's policies closely resembled the political economy of European absolutism.³⁷⁴ Although there was a development of *manufacturing*, no significant *industrialization* emerged. The Egyptian manufactures lacked mechanization, social division of labor, and new energy resources.³⁷⁵ There was neither a *formal* nor a *real* subsumption of labor under capital:³⁷⁶ laborers were drawn into the production process by means of extra-economic *corvée* and not through a contract; and the new production methods did not transform pre-capitalist relations of production and exploitation into capitalist ones. These indications negate the concept of an "indigenous" transition towards capitalism during the reign of Muhammad Ali.³⁷⁷

Imperialism and Feudalization

Muhammad Ali's military expansionism and economic protectionism brought him into a showdown with the European powers – especially Great Britain – which sought to stabilize the Ottoman Empire. Through the Anglo-Ottoman Commercial Convention (1838) and the Treaties of London (1840, 1841) the military power and economic sovereignty of Ali's Egypt was curtailed. The reduction of Egypt's domestic and regional markets and the imposition of a free trade regime created, until the 1930s, external obstacles for an indigenous road to industrial and capitalist development.³⁷⁸ Between 1850 and 1880, Egypt was fully

³⁷³ Owen 2005: 114–15; Tucker 2005: 234–35.

³⁷⁴ Khafaji 2004: 43

³⁷⁵ Beinin 2001: 42-3.

³⁷⁶ The "formal" subsumption of labor under capital is the submission of labor power to the direct control and supervision of capitalists (e.g. via the labor contract), whereas the "real" subsumption of labor entails the transformation of social and material conditions of production by the intervention of capital. (Marx and Engels 1994: 93-121)

³⁷⁷ Abdel-Malek 1983: 122.

³⁷⁸ Beinin 2001: 26-7, 45.

integrated into the capitalist world market on the basis of raw cotton production.³⁷⁹

European imperialism³⁸⁰ ended the absolutism of Muhammad Ali. The Egyptian state now found itself scraping for financial resources. Foreign intervention strengthened the resistance of pre-capitalist structures and social forces against political centralization and economic modernization.³⁸¹ Peasant struggles against conscription and heavy taxation led to a shortage of labor and a decline of state revenue. In exchange for an advance payment of taxes the Pasha granted his family, military officers, and other clients state lands. By 1844-48 53 percent of lands (often the most fertile ones) were in private hands.³⁸² Concentration of lands was stimulated by the cultivation of long-staple cotton – introduced in 1821 – which was capital and labor-intensive, required new production methods, and was best cultivated on large plots. The original goal of this “privatization” process was to reassert State control over the villages through the authority of an official who placed villagers in debt bondage until they paid their taxes.³⁸³ However, tax farming, the delegation of state power to local landlords, and the debt bondage system reinforced feudalistic relations in the countryside.³⁸⁴

During the reign of Muhammad Ali’s successors, the “feudal turn”³⁸⁵ was reinforced. The building of the Suez Canal (1854-63) generated more debts than

³⁷⁹ Chaichian 1988: 28.

³⁸⁰ Used here in its ordinary, non-Leninist sense of military and economic expansion.

³⁸¹ Cuno 2005: 221; Issawi 2005: 189; Tucker 2005: 232.

³⁸² Beinín 2001: 52.

³⁸³ Mitchell 2002: 66.

³⁸⁴ Khafaji 2004: 19-20

³⁸⁵ I am conscious of the fact that the term “feudalism” evokes connotations particular to the European experience. Beinín, for example, is cautious to connect the establishment of private large landholdings with a rise of feudalism. (Beinín 2001: 53) He describes the dominant social form as “backward colonial capitalism” and uses the term of “agrarian bourgeoisie” to denote the large landholders. (Beinín and Lockman 1987: *passim*) However, on other occasions he states that there was no development towards capitalism in Egypt, despite the existence of cash-crop farming, markets, and money (Beinín 2001: 11-2), and that “...there was little investment, even by wealthy landowners, in either mechanization or in other means of raising productivity.” (Beinín and Lockman 1987: 9). This illustrates that there was no real drive for capital accumulation in the Egyptian countryside. (See De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming]) Lacking a specific term to denote the particular process, I argue that it is more correct to talk about a process of feudalization than the formation of an agrarian capitalism; especially because there was a

revenues for the Egyptian state. This was compensated, at first, by the American Civil War (1861-1865), which heightened the demand for Egyptian cotton. The bulk of new revenue was used for the modernization of the military, urban prestige projects, and as a guarantee for further loans. When the Civil War ended, American cotton hit the world market and global cotton prices dropped, causing a fiscal crisis in Egypt. Between 1865 and 1868 taxes were raised 70 percent, which indebted many peasants and led to a further concentration of agricultural lands.³⁸⁶ In 1871 new tax reforms made small landholders lose their lands and become an “unpaid, bonded workforce”³⁸⁷. Peasants were converted into laborers who received a small plot of land for themselves or who were paid in kind.³⁸⁸

The economic depression of 1873-96 led to a global decline of prices for agricultural produce, which caused the bankruptcy of several Ottoman provinces. Their inability to pay debts instigated European intervention in their internal financial affairs. In 1876 the Caisse de la Dette Publique was established to oversee Egypt’s treasury. In order to secure its financial grip, Great Britain had to intervene directly in Egypt’s politics. In 1882 British troops occupied Egypt to quell the revolt of Colonel Urabi against foreign domination.³⁸⁹ This marked the beginning of the colonial era.

Workers before Class

Muhammad Ali’s push for “manufacturization” was based on extra-economic *corvée* labor and did not initiate a process of proletarianization.³⁹⁰ Farmers and artisans who had constituted the workforce of the manufactures moved effortlessly back to their original occupations.³⁹¹ The port, railway, urban, and canal construction during the reign of the Pashas in the second half of the nineteenth century was also based on *corvée* and did not constitute a collection of wage laborers that could develop into a modern working class.³⁹²

tendency among small landholders to lose their lands and become an “unpaid, bonded workforce” as discussed further in the text.

³⁸⁶ Beinin 2001: 52.

³⁸⁷ Mitchell 2002: 73.

³⁸⁸ Owen 2005: 119.

³⁸⁹ Ibid. 119–120.

³⁹⁰ Beinin 1981: 14.

³⁹¹ Lockman 1996: 80.

³⁹² Ibid. 83.

The British occupation and the beginning of the colonial era coincided with the legal and actual abandonment of *corvée* labor and the formal recognition of private property in land.³⁹³ As advanced irrigation techniques had removed the dead season, landlords wanted full control over the labor of their farmers. The process of feudalization and dispossession bereft many peasants from their lands and drove them to Egypt's first industries: "...they could now be recruited not by physical coercion through the bureaucratic and repressive mechanisms of the state... but rather through the less obviously coercive mechanism of the market, which just as effectively kept wages low and working conditions inhuman."³⁹⁴

In the 1880s, the Egyptian industrial workforce stood at the threshold of a transformation in the direction of a modern working class. The Port Said coal heavers' strike of April 1882 revealed a fledgling worker Subjectivity within an ensemble of predominating pre-capitalist Subjectivities. The coal heavers were peasants-turned-laborers from Upper Egypt and were paid by piece rate. When their demand for a higher rate was not met, they went on strike, blocking coal operations on the canal. The Urabi government intervened on behalf of the laborers and put the British coaling companies under pressure to accede to the strikers' demands. However, when the British occupied Egypt, they restored the previous piece rate.³⁹⁵

This episode of the Strike entailed two forms of struggle that expressed the dual nature of the Port Said workforce. Firstly, the coal heavers "...can thus be understood as wage workers subject to an essentially capitalist system of labor contracting, hence comprehensible within a narrative of modern labor activism."³⁹⁶ Their struggle was oriented against the exploitation of a foreign, capitalist industrial company. As such it was both the first stirring of a nascent modern workers' movement, and the earliest shape of an alliance between workers and the national liberation movement. Secondly, at the moment of the strike the organization of "coal heaver laborers" was still much a pre-capitalist formation; a unity of "...exploitative labor contractors against... exploited contracted wage workers."³⁹⁷ From this perspective, the coal heaver strike was also representative of the final pangs

³⁹³ Beinin 1981: 15.

³⁹⁴ Lockman 1996: 83.

³⁹⁵ Ibid. 84.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 85.

of the pre-capitalist “guild” organization that, by then, acted primarily as a labor contracting instrument.³⁹⁸ Even though throughout the nineteenth century the organic *tawa’if* were slowly replaced by State institutions: “...the discourse of occupational identity still remained powerful.”³⁹⁹

The transformation from a pre-capitalist “estate” Subjectivity to a modern “class” Subjectivity reached a next phase in 1896, when the coal heaver laborers presented a petition to Lord Cromer, demanding fair treatment from their “own” *shuyukh*.⁴⁰⁰ This episode reflected a horizontal class cleavage in the vertical structure of the coal heavers’ organization. Nevertheless, the systematic use of the word *‘amil* (*‘ummal*) to denote a modern wage worker emerged in Egypt only at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁰¹ At that point, however, the Egyptian social formation was already being reconstructed by colonialism.

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³⁹⁸ Chalcraft 2001: 114.

³⁹⁹ Lockman 1996: 80.

⁴⁰⁰ Gabriel Baer in Lockman 1996: 85-6.

⁴⁰¹ Lockman 1996: 77-8.

CHAPTER 6

Colonialism

It is altogether self-evident that, to be able to fight at all, the working class must organize itself at home as a class and that its own country is the immediate arena of its struggle — insofar as its class struggle is national, not in substance, but, as the Communist Manifesto says, 'in form'.

Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program (2008: 30)

A Colonial Historical Bloc

British colonialism encouraged the uneven and combined development of Egypt's economy. Cultivating cotton required large estates and stimulated "bimodalism" in the countryside: "*a land-tenure system that combines a small number of owners holding very large estates with a large number of owners holding very small farms.*"⁴⁰² Agriculture was politically and economically controlled by domestic large-scale landowners with connections to urban centers of trade and petty commodity production.⁴⁰³ The colonial State did not abolish feudalism in the countryside because "farming out" the production of cotton to domestic landlords was more profitable for foreign capital. In this manner, the colonial state reinforced the unevenness and "backwardness" of Egypt's economy vis-à-vis the European powers.

On the other hand, through the instrument of the colonial State, foreign industrial and finance capital forcefully introduced the capitalist mode of production in Egypt.⁴⁰⁴ In the early 1870s Khedive⁴⁰⁵ Ismail had implemented a modest industrialization program, establishing some 40 state owned enterprises. The state bankruptcy of 1876 led to either their destruction or sale to foreign firms. From then onwards the initiative of industrialization shifted to foreign corporations and the *mutamassirun*: foreign capitalists living in Egypt.⁴⁰⁶ Egypt under colonialism was not only the product of an *uneven* development, but its social formation also *combined* pre-capitalist social and economic structures with

⁴⁰² Richards and Waterbury 2008: 177.

⁴⁰³ Bush 2007: 1601.

⁴⁰⁴ Clawson 1978.

⁴⁰⁵ Viceroy.

⁴⁰⁶ Beinin 2001: 68.

modern industries and capitalist relations of production. Foreign capital introduced the capitalist mode of production, but de-industrialized most of the indigenous manufacturers, preparing the Egyptian markets for an influx of European commodities.⁴⁰⁷ The industrializing role of the colonial State was restricted to the creation of large-scale transport, communication, service and (some) manufacturing enterprises.

Rural landlords, urban merchants, and colonial capitalists had identical interests: the provision of agricultural goods to international markets. Hence, merchant capitalists and landlords allied to foreign capital kept their positions as local and national elites in the Egyptian social formation.⁴⁰⁸ The colonial intervention had created the first modern historical bloc in Egypt, which was a combination of pre-capitalist and capitalist social forms, presided by an alliance between foreign capital and domestic landed and commercial forces.

During the economic crisis of 1906-08, global prices of cotton dropped. Some large landowners realized that monoculture production posed risks and that the base of their wealth should be diversified with other economic activities. Merchant capitalists regained their former socio-economic position and partially became commercial capitalists engaged in loan activities, real estate speculation, and intermediary trade. Landowners, attracted by the large profit margin, invested in these activities. Both classes became aware that foreign capital appropriated a large part of the surplus value and this became the focus of a conflict of interests. Domestic commercial and landed elites aimed to renegotiate their position within the colonial historical bloc. Their struggle led to a confrontation with the colonial State and to the formation of a nationalist movement, led by large landlords and supported by the emerging modern middle classes and the urban proletariat.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Khafaji 2004: 41.

⁴⁰⁸ Chaichian 1988: 30. Estimating the evolution of the position and weight of wage labor in the total workforce is difficult. Firstly, before the Second World War, statistical sources are almost non-existent. Secondly, the primary source – the census of 1907, 1917, 1927, 1937, and 1947 – presents a *sectoral* composition of the workforce, which does not allow for an investigation into the character of the *relations* of production. Nevertheless, the tripling of workers in mining and manufacturing between 1907 and 1947 points towards a qualitative transformation of the economic structure. (Beinin and Lockman 1987: 38)

⁴⁰⁹ Beinin 2001: 46-7; 72; Farah 2009: 28.

Colonial Proletarians

At the end of the nineteenth century, an estimated 37 percent of the rural workforce had become wage laborers.⁴¹⁰ Apart from the process of proletarianization in the countryside, the colonial industries generated a modern urban working class that existed side by side with the traditional *tawa'if* craftsmen.⁴¹¹ The strengthening of landed property drove farmers to the cities where they engaged in petty commodity production, as there were few jobs to be found in the modern colonial industries:⁴¹² *"There were only 15 modern European style factories employing 30-35,000 workers in Egypt in 1916."*⁴¹³ Urban wage laborers ended up chiefly in the transport, communication, and services sector of the colonial State.

Although there were many strikes throughout the 1880s and 1890s, most of them expressed a dual, transitory character, as I discussed via the example of the Port Said strike in the previous chapter. The first "modern" strike that initiated a process of development of the Egyptian worker Subject was probably the collective action of the cigarette rollers between December 1899 and February 1900. Lockman summarized its significance as follows: *"It involved several thousand skilled workers from many different workplaces, some of them quite large, who went on strike simultaneously and remained out for two months, suggesting a strong sense of solidarity and a capacity for effective organization."*⁴¹⁴ The strike of the cigarette rollers spawned a short-lived trade union formation, and was followed by many other collective actions of Egyptian workers, who, in turn, constituted their own trade unionist neoformations. Just as the English "trade" union (1831) suggested a gathering of people on the basis of their "trade" or occupation, the first Egyptian trade union – the Manual Trades Workers' Union (MTWU) established in 1909 –

⁴¹⁰ Chaichian 1988: 33.

⁴¹¹ In 1907 489,296 wage laborers worked in the colonial production and transport industries. By 1917 this number increased to 639,929. (Ismael and al-Sa'id 1990: 15)

⁴¹² Koptiuch 1996: 47.

⁴¹³ Beinlin 1981: 15. Ironically, in this way, colonialism extended and reinvigorated the existence of pre-capitalist social forms. Kristin Koptiuch defined this process as "paradoxical preservation" which is "... essentially the subsumption of a new, modern form of petty commodity production... to colonial capital by virtue of this new form's inability to realize its own reproduction except insofar as that reproduction was tied to the expanded reproduction circuits of peripheral capitalism." (Koptiuch 1996: 62)

⁴¹⁴ Lockman 1996: 88.

was called *niqaba*, which referred to the position of the *naqib* (custodian) in the pre-capitalist *ta'ifa*.⁴¹⁵

However, the colonial historical bloc constituted a peculiar predicament for the development of the working class as a coherent social Subject. Many workers who were employed in the colonial industries were foreigners, living in their own, separate communities. For example, most cigarette rollers were Greek laborers, employed by Greek capitalists. Therefore, the strike of the cigarette rollers could be framed as a particular, intra-communal conflict instead of an exponent of the general struggle between labor and capital. Furthermore, the colonial economic structure reinforced a divide between: (1) the large-scale, capitalist companies that employed averagely skilled (and mostly foreign) wage workers; (2) an industrial periphery of unskilled Egyptian laborers employed in such activities as coal heaving; and (3) pre-capitalistic centers of petty commodity production and services that often employed highly skilled workers.⁴¹⁶ From the perspective of an emerging national worker Subject, each of these sections was further differentiated by “vertical” interests and Subjectivities.

Modern corporatism emerged in the Egyptian workers’ movement as the organic answer to the combined nature of the colonial economic structure. Trade unions such as the MTWU still embodied many pre-capitalist characteristics, such as the inclusion of non-wage laborers, property owners, and employers.⁴¹⁷ Some trade unions refused members on the basis of their religion, nationality, or specific position within the occupational hierarchy. Other worker organizations, such as the Cairo Tramway Workers’ Union (CTWU) established in 1909, were more “universally proletarian” and accepted all employees of the company as members on the basis that they were all wage laborers working for the same employer.

Colonial Intellectuals

The colonial mode of production and its State produced their own layer of organic intellectuals: the *effendiyya*, a group of modern middle class professionals, engineers, journalists, lawyers, teachers, and bureaucrats with a nationalist and

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. 90-1.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. 88.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 91.

Western outlook.⁴¹⁸ Many *effendiyya* became fellow travelers of the emerging anti-colonial or nationalist counter-bloc. They played a key role in the formation of the first counter-hegemonic apparatuses, such as the National Party and the *Wafd*.⁴¹⁹ The nationalist counter-bloc counted among its ranks such diverse forces as social-conservative landlords and peasants, radicalized layers of the *effendiyya* and, also, modern wage laborers. The development of the Strike in Egypt increasingly showed the capacity of workers to mobilize and organize themselves collectively. For nationalists, the emerging worker Subject constituted a powerful potential constituency for their own Project.⁴²⁰ The National Party helped to set up trade unions such as the MTWU and the Cairo tramway workers' union.⁴²¹

However, in general, the assistance of the nationalists to the workers' movement had a strongly colonizing character. The nationalists sought to emancipate themselves from political and economic domination through the activity of the workers, and aimed to overwrite the emerging class consciousness with a nationalist narrative of anti-colonialism. This colonization of emerging class Subjectivities was not a one-way street: the main antagonist of the Egyptian workers was Western capital in the shape of the colonial State and foreign-owned factories; and, as a result, the workers' struggles against exploitation were easily subsumed under a nationalist and anti-imperialist Subject. In general, the emergent trade unions recognized themselves economically and politically through the mediation of non-proletarian class forces such as bourgeois nationalists.

The 1919 Revolution

Like in other colonial countries such as India and China, the First World War enabled the Egyptian nationalist counter-hegemonic forces to rally popular dissatisfaction for the cause of independence.⁴²² After the war, an Egyptian delegation (*wafd*) led by the nationalist Saad Zaghlul, supported by a popular campaign of civil disobedience and petitions, demanded independence for the country. British repression of the movement in 1919 provoked a mass revolution,

⁴¹⁸ Beinín 2001:71; Richards and Waterbury 2008: 40–1, 123.

⁴¹⁹ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 10.

⁴²⁰ Lockman 1996: 100.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.* 90; 94.

⁴²² Beinín and Lockman 1987: 83.

which forced the colonial masters to grant Egypt conditional independence in 1922. Whereas the revolution expressed the slumbering agency of the subaltern Subjects involved, its trajectory also reflected their mutual separation. First, in March 1919, the peasantry rose in a rural insurrection, which was violently quelled by British military intervention. In the end, however, the Wafdist national-popular counter-bloc was unable to rally the peasants behind its nationalist Project, because their primary predicament was *feudalism* rather than *imperialism*.⁴²³

Then, from April on, began “...the protracted phase... that was less violent and more urban, with the large-scale participation of students, workers, lawyers, and other professionals.”⁴²⁴ Women participated as women nationalists in the emerging activity-system of the revolution – not only liberal, feminist women, but: “All types of women... upper, middle, popular, workers, peasants... because at the time the authorities of the British occupations arrested thousands of men, those who participated in the revolution, so women replaced them. Women played all the roles during the movement.”⁴²⁵ The political system was transformed into a constitutional monarchy based on the Belgian model, but, reflecting the revolution in general, it fell short of fully transforming Egypt into a civil democracy. Instead of overthrowing the colonial historical bloc, the 1919 revolution fortified the position of domestic actors vis-à-vis foreign forces in the existing power configuration. British capital relinquished its grip over the colonial State, but remained in control over the Suez canal, Egypt’s defense, foreign affairs, and minority policies. Imperialism was not defeated, but its partial retreat opened up

⁴²³ Al-Shakry 2011a. The absence of peasants as a social force within the counter-bloc would remain a weakness of the nationalist opposition up until the Free Officers’ coup.

⁴²⁴ Al-Shakry 2011a.

⁴²⁵ Interview with Farida Na’ash, Cairo, 27 November 2010. However, it was the more liberal and educated women who expressed their particular problems as women in the universal terms of civil democracy: “There was a feminist movement that started in Egypt by the end of the nineteenth century. Women established newspapers and magazines. Women participated in the 1919 revolution against the British occupation and the kingdom. They demonstrated against occupation. Four of the women were shot during these manifestations. At the time they established the federation of Egyptian women by Huda Shara’wi. She was a prominent leader of the feminist movement and of 1919 revolution, she was the wife of one of the leaders of the revolution. At the time they had a program on divorce, marriage, the personal code – they asked for a new personal code, they asked for restrictions of polygamy. They also demand the participation of women in the political life, but later on in the constitution of 1923 – the first modern constitution of Egypt – it didn’t include the right of women to vote or to be elected.” (Interview with Farida Na’ash, Cairo, 27 October 2010)

opportunities for domestic capitalists to embark on a project of “indigenous” industrialization. Their strategy of accumulation, however, was blocked by the powerful feudal lords and the British-supported King Fuad, who appeared as the most powerful political actor. The *colonial* historical bloc was thus reconstituted as a *neo-colonial* historical bloc, in which the colonial relations of power were renegotiated but not abolished. From the perspective of the national-popular “counter”-bloc, with the 1919 revolution, the project of Egypt’s national liberation had just begun.

The rise of nationalist politics also coincided with the emergence of a strong trade unionist movement. The war caused food shortages and rising inflation, which decreased real wages between 1917-18. Cigarette workers in Alexandria and Cairo organized the first war-time strikes, demanding higher wages. In their wake other groups of workers began to protest declining wages and worsening working conditions. With the help of the National Party, the MTWU was revived, and other, new trade unions emerged from the struggle.⁴²⁶ Workers took advantage of the nationalist revolution as a space for the Mass Strike:⁴²⁷ “*The popular uprising, spontaneous and massive, incorporated and sustained this new social movement, and made possible its rapid growth and quick victories.*”⁴²⁸ Conversely, economic strikes were often perceived by non-proletarian actors as a form of support for the nationalist activity-system of resistance – principally because most striking workers were employed by the colonial industries and its State.⁴²⁹

The workers’ “war of movement” and their partisan participation in the anti-colonial bloc forged new links between their own organic intellectuals and the nationalist *effendiyya*. The *effendiyya* assisted workers to set up new trade unions, consolidating the mass strikes into more or less stable proletarian neoformations. However, the mode of assistance was largely colonial, as workers were subsumed under the nationalist Project. This expressed: “...*the relative weakness and dependent status of the young working class and labor movement.*”⁴³⁰ From the perspective of the *effendiyya*, workers were just another force in the struggle against foreign domination.

⁴²⁶ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 84-8.

⁴²⁷ See Luxemburg in *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*.

⁴²⁸ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 90.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.* 92; 99.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.* 105.

CHAPTER 7

Neo-Colonialism

The Wafd is the people's party and represents an important and natural step in our development. The National Party is Turkish, religious, and reactionary. The Wafd Party has crystallized and purified Egyptian nationalism. It has also been a school for nationalism and democracy. But the point is that the nation is not and must not be content with this school. We want a further stage of development. We desire a school for socialism. Independence is not the ultimate goal. It's a way to obtain the people's constitutional, economic, and human rights.

"Adli Karim" in Naguib Mahfouz's Sugar Street (2001: 80)

Dependent Development

In 1920 nationalist landowners provided the capital for the establishment of an independent Egyptian bank with the explicit goal of creating an indigenous industrial sector.⁴³¹ Industry would diversify the landholders' sources of income and break the domination of foreign finance capital.⁴³² Bank Misr concentrated its funds on low value-added cotton production, establishing industries such as the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra, which became the largest industrial complex of the Middle East at the end of the Second World War. Political developments such as the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the abolition of capitulations in 1937 allowed the Egyptian state to implement protectionist measures to protect its budding national industry. The crisis of the 1930s reduced European commodity exports to the Middle East and expanded the market for domestic firms.⁴³³ At the same time, it increased Western capital exports, as British and French capitalists were more inclined to invest outside Europe because of falling profits at their domestic markets.⁴³⁴

At this juncture, it seemed as if Egypt's "privilege of backwardness" could have catapulted the country's economy into the era of advanced capitalism. However, Misr Industries was unable to transform the Egyptian economy. Firstly, the "privilege of backwardness" only applies when a society is able to use the most advanced forms available in order to skip the intermediate stages of

⁴³¹ Deeb 1976.

⁴³² Beinun and Lockman 1987: 10–11.

⁴³³ Ibid. 257.

⁴³⁴ Clawson 1978: 19.

development. In Egypt the imported machines were outdated, which rendered its industry less productive and more labor intensive than its international competitors. Moreover, low labor costs did not raise incentives to increase efficiency.⁴³⁵ Secondly, Bank Misr was not strong enough to compete with foreign capital. Even though “indigenous” Egyptian capitalists played an important role in the industrialization process of the 1930s and 1940s, foreign and *mutamassir* capital remained the chief protagonists of capitalist development. Their industries were better established and they often controlled monopolies and semi-monopolies. Misr Industries was not profitable enough and declined sharply. In the late 1930s Bank Misr entered into joint ventures with British enterprises, as they possessed the keys to the world market.⁴³⁶ Consequently, Bank Misr’s “national character” was subordinated to foreign capital.⁴³⁷ The largest share of Egyptian capital was still controlled by feudal landlords and directed towards the foreign and *mutamassir*-dominated cotton market.⁴³⁸ Thirdly, the Second World War stimulated industrial production while it re-oriented industries towards the needs and demands of foreign markets. The end of the war lowered foreign demand and plunged Egyptian industries into crisis causing high rates of unemployment and raising the cost of living. The crisis increased the centralization of land ownership.⁴³⁹ Landlords were even more inclined to invest in their profitable landholdings than industrial production.

The Egyptian neo-colonial historical bloc continued to be composed of landowners, *mutamassirun*, “indigeneous” capitalists, the Palace, foreign capital, and the British State. Domestic capitalists began to consolidate their own hegemonic Project in a contradictory relationship of both competition and alliance with international capital. However, the path to the formation of an Egyptian modern integral State was obstructed by the stubborn remains of pre-capitalist social forms and the dependency on foreign capital. Civil society remained

⁴³⁵ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 259; Beinín 2001: 111. In addition, capitalists allowed a labor surplus in their factories which depressed productivity. They posited that less workers per machine would increase tensions in the workplaces. In other words, peace and subordination on the factory floor was more important than the maximalization of profits. (Beinín and Lockman 1987: 276)

⁴³⁶ Clawson 1978: 20.

⁴³⁷ Deeb 1976: 79.

⁴³⁸ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 11-4; 264, 449.

⁴³⁹ Ansari 1986: 26.

underdeveloped and the constant use of coercive State power was the gambit of a weak indigenous ruling class wishing to superimpose itself on the subaltern classes.

The Road to Trade Unionism

Between 1920 and 1924 economic conditions worsened for the working class as unemployment was on the rise and real wages remained low. However, the workers' movement had emerged stronger out of the revolutionary year of 1919, encompassing 89 formal trade unions in Cairo, Alexandria, and the Suez Canal Zone. Whereas the MTWU was on the decline, public services unions in tramway, gas, electric, and water companies became the leading neoformations of the struggle.⁴⁴⁰

Before and during the First World War socialist ideas and methods of struggle had seeped into Egypt,⁴⁴¹ but only in 1921 was the Egyptian Socialist Party (ESP) formally established. The leaders of the ESP were Egyptian and foreign intellectuals who were strongly influenced by both the spirit of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the reformist strategy of European social-democracy. Within a year the party moved to the left, embraced Bolshevism, and, reborn as the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE), became a member of the Comintern.⁴⁴²

Between 1918 and 1924 the young socialist movement entered the trade unions and even though its directive role was limited, it played an important instructive part: *"It projected conceptions of Egyptian society and of working class identity that challenged those of the Wafd whose bourgeois nationalism the left criticized."*⁴⁴³ Initially the CPE was principally anti-capitalist, and rejected an alliance with bourgeois nationalist forces such as the *Wafd*,⁴⁴⁴ but at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1923 communist parties in colonial countries were encouraged to participate in the national liberation movements – even if they were dominated by bourgeois class fractions. For Egypt, this marked the embrace of the two-stage theory of socialism by the communist movement: communists had to cooperate with nationalists in order to get rid of foreign domination *first*, and only *then* could

⁴⁴⁰ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 124.

⁴⁴¹ Especially by Egyptian students returning from Europe. (Ismael and al-Sa'id 1990: 1)

⁴⁴² Beinin and Lockman 1987: 139-41; Ismael and al-Sa'id 1990: 17.

⁴⁴³ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 138.

⁴⁴⁴ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 143; Ismael and al-Sa'id 1990: 22.

they fight for socialism.⁴⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the first communists were able to give the workers a self-concept as a class "...independent of other class forces and oriented toward social transformation through political and industrial power..."⁴⁴⁶

Despite the presence of leftist activists in some of the trade unions, the *Wafd* maintained a strong influence over the workers' movement. Moreover, the first "wave of communism" was short lived. In 1924 a spontaneous strike movement in Alexandria, supported but not organized by the fading National Party and the young CPE, was crushed by the *Wafd* government. CPE leaders were arrested and the communist movement collapsed. Attempts were made to revive the communist movement, but due to the liquidation of its vanguard and the continued repression of its activists by the neo-colonial State communism as a political force only resurfaced during the Second World War.⁴⁴⁷

When the *Wafd* won the parliamentary elections in 1924, it aimed to subsume the existing movements under its direct, paternalistic control in a General Federation of Labor Unions (GFLU).⁴⁴⁸ Workers accepted the *Wafd*'s hegemony as long as the party would be able to solve their problems in its corporatist ways. Moreover, they principally accepted the *Wafd*'s claim that Britain's continued domination was the nation's priority, as it was mostly British troops who quelled strikes and labor protests.⁴⁴⁹ The *Wafd* appeared as the uncontested hegemonic leader of the popular anti-colonial counter-bloc.

From the perspective of the development of the Strike, Egyptian trade unionism in the Interbellum was a "pathological" corporatist neoformation. The GFLU overcame the economic-corporate predicament of the workers in an artificial and colonizing way: the workers' suffering was decreased by the external intervention of a "higher" power, which, at the same time, denied the workers the means to develop self-determination and self-governance. The *Wafd* appropriated the protest activities of the workers, and subsumed them under the battle of the "nation" against "foreign domination". The nationalists' concept of the "worker" and "capitalism" was amorphous and undeveloped, reflecting the still gelatinous composition of the Egyptian working class and the lack of large-

⁴⁴⁵ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 144; 146.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid. 154.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid. 147-18; 152.

⁴⁴⁸ Ismael and al-Sa'id 1990: 28-9.

⁴⁴⁹ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 135-7.

scale private industries owned by Egyptians. “Workers” were still conceived of as a *collection* of pre-capitalist and capitalist *manual* laborers, instead of a coherent *class* of *wage* laborers.⁴⁵⁰ Not the social position within the ensemble of production relations, but the material method of production determined if a person was considered a worker or not. Likewise, a critique of capitalism was reduced to a critique of foreign domination, because the nationalists had themselves little experience with the capitalist mode of production and its far-reaching social transformations.⁴⁵¹ The corporatist ambitions of the *Wafd* anticipated Nasser’s hegemonic politics, which successfully integrated the workers’ movement into the State.

Between 1930 and 1935 the *Wafd* was replaced as the “Savior-Ruler” of the workers’ movement by Prince Abbas Ibrahim Halim, who was a great-grandson of Muhammad Ali and a cousin of the King. Halim sided with the *Wafd* against the King and gained the patronage over the trade unions, which were now gathered in the National Federation of Trade Unions in Egypt (NFTUE). To counterbalance the influence of the *Wafd* and secure the NFTUE as a personal base of power, the Prince encouraged workers instead of non-proletarian elements to lead the movement, and sponsored the structure with his own money. Even though the concept of a workers’ movement governed by workers themselves was a step in the direction of self-determination, in reality the NFTUE remained under strict control of its princely patron.⁴⁵² In 1935 the *Wafd* aimed to retake direct control over the trade unions. Because of a rise in political protests in 1936 and the *Wafd*’s leadership of the national-popular anti-colonial bloc, Halim’s federation lost prestige and disintegrated. However, the unions that had constituted the NFTUE remained in existence and continued to struggle without the patronage of their Prince. For them, Abbas Halim’s rule had been a transition towards autonomy from the *Wafd*.⁴⁵³

In 1936 King Fouad died and was succeeded by his son Faruq. The *Wafd* returned to power and negotiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which granted

⁴⁵⁰ The process of proletarianization was gradual and slow, due to the low rate of rural to urban migration and the expansion of the traditionally organized service and artisan sectors. Sufi orders, the Bazaars and guilds formed urban associations, reinforcing the social fabric of city workers. (Ayubi 1991: 171)

⁴⁵¹ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 162.

⁴⁵² Ibid. 196-208.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 210-5.

Egypt increased independence – except for a continued presence of British troops in the Suez Canal Zone. This episode was both the high point and the beginning of the end for the *Wafd* as a counter-hegemonic force. Not only did Britain and the King systematically undermine its rule, from 1936 onwards its leadership over the national-popular counter-bloc was eroded from within by the emergence of an independent workers' movement.⁴⁵⁴ Workers could and would no longer wait to address their economic problems until the colonial question was resolved. Inspired by mass strikes in Europe, they began to strike themselves.⁴⁵⁵ No longer able to simply *colonize* the workers' movement, the *Wafd* tried to *commodify* it, promising workers concessions if they went back to work. There was a shift in the discourse of the *Wafd* vis-à-vis the workers: its hegemony “...was based not on patriotism or the need for national unity but on purely pragmatic grounds.”⁴⁵⁶ According to the *Wafd*, workers did not have the political capacity to solve society's problems, so they should support the *Wafd* in this task, and in return the *Wafd* would, step by step, concede to their economic demands. The position of workers within the national-popular bloc was reconfigured as they now appeared as a more or less independent ally of the bourgeois leading class.

From 1937 onwards, autonomous trade unions aimed to create a new, legal, and independent federation. They established the General Federation of Labor Unions in the Kingdom of Egypt (GFLUKE), which was the first fully independent trade union federation in Egyptian history. Trade unionism finally began to overcome the economic-corporate condition of the Egyptian working class. From the spontaneous activity of the workers' struggle a self-concept of wage laborers as a class emerged – even though many of its members were still artisans and petty producers. Ironically, at this point trade unionism already showed signs of becoming a future obstacle for the further development of the worker Subject. Governed by pragmatism, trade union leaders were not

⁴⁵⁴ In addition, layers of the nationalist *effendiyya* were disappointed with the “imperialist compromise” of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 and were alienated from the *Wafd*. Some of them reinforced the workers' movement, others chose the path of Islamism – via the Muslim Brotherhood – or even fascism – e.g. through the “Young Egypt” movement. The attraction of fascism – which was perceived as a “strong” version of nationalism – among impatient *Wafdists* was all the more understandable when Italy and Germany emerged as enemies of Britain in the geopolitical arena. (Beinin and Lockman 1987: 287)

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 219-22.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 224.

interested in politics as such, and were ready to strike a deal with any party as long as it suited their short-term goals. The GFLUKE was never legalized. The outbreak of the Second World War granted the neo-colonial State the opportunity to repress the federation.⁴⁵⁷

The Muslim Brotherhood

In 1928 Hassan al-Banna, a young teacher, established the Society of Muslim Brothers or *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*. At this historical stage, the rise and success of the Brotherhood can be seen as both an expression of and a reaction against Egypt's uneven and combined development. The class base of the Society consisted of "traditional", pre-capitalist, urban artisans and petty merchants, as well as "modern" white collar workers, civil servants, teachers, and other layers of *effendiyya* that had been produced by colonialism.⁴⁵⁸ The hybridity of its social constituency revealed itself in the ideological mobilization of modern notions of corporatism, organicism,⁴⁵⁹ and paternalism,⁴⁶⁰ which expressed the combined nature of the Egyptian social form.

The activity-system of the *Ikhwan* structured and totalized a whole range of activities in which these groups participated: education; charity; the building of mosques; sports; the organization of healthcare and welfare; media; and politics. The primary object of Islamic "pillarization" was the prevention of the disintegration of Egypt's pre-capitalist social forms by neo-colonial capitalism. For the Muslim Brothers, cultural and religious "foreignness", rather than the political economy of dependent capitalism, constituted Egypt's predicament. A utopian vision of the Islamic past, rather than Western modernity was the analeptic ideal to which the Brotherhood aspired.⁴⁶¹

Yet, despite its pre-capitalist ideological appearance and rigid master-disciple relations, the Society's activity-system was organized and structured along "modern" lines with elections, debate, membership and meritocracy.⁴⁶² In

⁴⁵⁷ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 234-41.

⁴⁵⁸ Ayubi 1991: 171.

⁴⁵⁹ A holist but hierarchical vision of society which parallels the human body: e.g. the ruling classes as the head; the professional groups and soldiers as the hands; and the manual workers as the feet.

⁴⁶⁰ Beinin and Lockman 1987:348; 363-5; 371-6; Mitchell 1993: 42-8.

⁴⁶¹ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 376.

⁴⁶² Ibid. 373-6; Lia 1998: 60-71; 98-104.

addition, its political practice was less oriented towards a utopian notion of the past than a modernist view of the future. The militancy of its anti-colonial discourse surpassed that of the secular *Wafd*, which was held back by its leadership of neo-colonial landowners.

Although the Brotherhood advanced social demands that aimed to alleviate modern forms of exploitation, domination, and alienation, it did not assist in the development of the self-determination of new subaltern social Subjects, such as the working class, which had arisen due to the penetration of the capitalist mode of production. The *Ikhwan* rejected the autonomy of the workers' movement and only supported its strikes in foreign-owned companies. Like the nationalists, the Brothers assisted the workers' movement in a colonizing way, blocking its development as an immanent Project. The workers' predicament had to be solved through the tripartite corporatism of State, employers, and employees.⁴⁶³ This stance on organized labor combined both a traditional "guild" outlook of vertical integration of the interests of "masters" and "craftsmen", and a modern notion of the defense of the "national good".

As a political force, the *Ikhwan* articulated some of the classic "tasks" of the national-democratic revolution. The political program of the Brotherhood demanded a State-led economy, nationalization of key industries, an "Islamic" financial system – which would guarantee interest-free loans for Egypt's budding industrial development – and social reforms, such as a minimum wage for civil servants and unemployment benefits.⁴⁶⁴

However, the Brotherhood was all but a revolutionary Islamic force bent on the conquest and transformation of State power. Not the establishment of an Islamic State, but "change and reform" – the Islamization of society and the expansion of Sharia law – was the priority of the movement.⁴⁶⁵ A practice of incremental reform and compromise with the current rulers characterized *Ikhwan* politics. As such, the Society seemed to be caught in a perpetual "war of position" strategy, which advanced the movement in periods of relative societal stability, but challenged its political premises in periods of crisis. For example, even though al-Banna participated in the elections of 1942 and 1945, parliamentary agitation was

⁴⁶³ Ayubi 1991: 174.

⁴⁶⁴ Lia 1998; Mitchell 1993: 7-19.

⁴⁶⁵ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 376.

rather seen as a means to expand influence and achieve certain concrete demands, than a strategy of conquering State power.⁴⁶⁶

The Second Wave of Communism

The Second World War stimulated industrial production in Egypt to sustain the British war effort. In 1942 British troops intervened against King Faruq,⁴⁶⁷ and, ironically, brought a *Wafd* government to power. As the war economy needed a stable and docile workforce, Britain favored a (temporary) politics of cooptation and concession towards “its” colonial and neocolonial workers’ movements.⁴⁶⁸ In 1942, for the first time in Egyptian history, trade unions were legalized. Trade union *federations*, however, remained outlawed, crippling the capacity of workers to overcome their fragmentation into different workplaces and industrial sectors.⁴⁶⁹ Circumventing the law, the *Wafd* organized its own “Clubs” and “Fronts”, which gathered unions from various companies. However, after the *Wafd* left power in 1944, its direct directive and technical role in the workers’ movement ended for good.⁴⁷⁰ Trade unionists began to experiment with their own political neoformations, such as the Workers’ Committee for National Liberation (WCNL) in 1945.⁴⁷¹

The emergence of a fully independent workers’ movement coincided with the rebirth of communism in Egypt. In fact, there was a reciprocal assistance between workers and communists in building their respective neoformations: “*Communist influence was partly the result of, and in turn accelerated, the decline of patron-client association and corporatist ideology in the workers’ movement.*”⁴⁷² In the second half of the 1930s, communist ideas were reintroduced by Italian and Greek migrants and Jewish intellectuals.⁴⁷³ From the 1940s onwards, the “second wave of communism” gave the proletarian struggle a political perspective and bridged

⁴⁶⁶ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 377.

⁴⁶⁷ Faruq had developed pro-German sympathies in order to counterbalance British influence in Egypt.

⁴⁶⁸ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 288. However, wealthy Egyptian landowners and capitalists resisted any substantial concession to the workers’ movement. (Ibid. 304-5)

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid. 291.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid. 301.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid. 335-6.

⁴⁷² Ibid. 310.

⁴⁷³ Ismael and al-Sa’id 1990: 32-3.

the gap between a layer of radicalized *effendiyya* and workers. It also interpellated a leftist wing in the *Wafd* around the “Wafdist Vanguard” tendency.⁴⁷⁴

The potential proletarian “Prince”, however, was from its inception strongly divided. Between 1942 and 1952, Egyptian communism was represented by various organizations, of which the most influential were: the Communist Party of Egypt, the People’s Liberation Group, *Iskra*,⁴⁷⁵ the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation (EMNL), and New Dawn.⁴⁷⁶ Apart from personal and sectarian infighting, there were important organizational, tactical and strategic differences with regard to the degree of centralization of the movement, the role of students and intellectuals, and the nature of the Egyptian working class and bourgeoisie.⁴⁷⁷

Organic Crisis

By 1948, more than half a million workers were employed in the new industries.⁴⁷⁸ However, after the Second World War, industrial unemployment decreased, not only due to the end of war-time demand, but also because of the increased mechanization of industries and the concentration of the workforce in a few large factories. The industries could not absorb the exodus of rural laborers, who ended up in the service and petty trading sectors.⁴⁷⁹ The uneven and combined character of Egypt’s economy was expressed in the composition of the working class:

The working class of the postwar period therefore included, at one end of the spectrum, a large number of workers employed in very small enterprises producing in labor-intensive and capital-poor conditions where the distinction between employer and employee was often not very sharp, and at the other end, a large, and

⁴⁷⁴ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 311.

⁴⁷⁵ Russian for “Spark” – used in reference to Lenin’s newspaper of 1901-1905.

⁴⁷⁶ Ismael and al-Sa’id 1990.

⁴⁷⁷ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 313-40. Only in 1958 was a unitary Communist Party of Egypt founded – and by then Nasserist hegemony over the workers’ movement was firmly established.

⁴⁷⁸ Chaichian 1988: 33. Half of them were employed in the British military production centers. (Beinin and Lockman 1987: 260) This means that around 1947-48 industrial wage laborers composed 28 percent of the total workforce of more than 16 million. (Calculated on the basis of: Beinin and Lockman 1987: 38)

⁴⁷⁹ Chaichian 1988: 33. In 1907 the rural workforce composed 69 percent of Egypt’s total labor force. In 1947 this fell to 58 percent. (Beinin and Lockman 1987: 38)

*what is more important, growing number of workers in large-scale mass production industries.*⁴⁸⁰

The salient rise of industrial capitalism and “its” worker reinforced the concept of the worker as an industrial wage laborer vis-à-vis pre-capitalist notions of the “artisan”. The industrial worker was a *proletarian*, not only in the historical-conceptual sense of belonging to a category of working people bereft of their means of production, but also in its hyperbolic moral meaning of having nothing to lose except for his or her chains. Just as their European counterparts in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian proletariat suffered malnutrition, disease, overcrowded housing, unhygienic living conditions, illiteracy, et cetera. As Joel Beinin rightly stressed, these “...*material conditions of the working class were both a motive force and a constraint on the struggles which they waged.*”⁴⁸¹ For the industrial proletariat, capitalism was a predicament that did not offer them any means of liberation. They had to find the means of overcoming their conditions in themselves: in the development of the Strike. Textile workers replaced workers in public services sectors such as communication and transport as the vanguard of the Egyptian workers’ movement.⁴⁸²

The failure of domestic capitalists to independently industrialize and develop the economy, and the rise of landed, money-lending, and merchant capital revealed that Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century was not a social formation in gradual transition to “full” capitalism, but a society in crisis.⁴⁸³ First imperialism, then colonialism, and, lastly, neo-colonialism had continuously reinforced the position of feudalistic landowners and commercial capitalists vis-à-vis fledgling domestic industrial capitalists. Instead of simply “dissolving” feudal relations, capitalism added a new layer of social contradictions to Egyptian society. Up until the early 1950s, powerful feudalistic landlords were still able to block any attempt at land distribution among the small peasants. In general, landlords were reluctant to free capital from agriculture, especially the profitable production of cotton, and channel it into risky industrial initiatives that could not compete with Western manufacturing. Some of them did engage, hesitantly, in the building of an Egyptian industrial base, and could be perceived as a kind of

⁴⁸⁰ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 265.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 272.

⁴⁸² Ibid. 274.

⁴⁸³ Chaichian 1988: 35; Khafaji 2004: 56.

“native” bourgeoisie, but, in the end, there was no fundamental differentiation between landed, financial, commercial, and industrial interests, nor was there a clear break with foreign and *mutamassir* capital.⁴⁸⁴ The Egyptian “industrial bourgeoisie” had not developed itself as a class, but remained a fragmented, amorphous collection of economic actors, subjugated to domestic landlords and international capital groups, and thus incapable of leading a national hegemonic bloc.⁴⁸⁵

The *effendiyya*, for their part, longed for national sovereignty and economic modernization⁴⁸⁶, but they did not constitute a social force of their own. Because of the economic-corporate condition of the Egyptian bourgeoisie,⁴⁸⁷ they turned increasingly to other social Subjects, such as the emerging workers’ movement, as a means to emancipate themselves from colonialism. Especially after the Second World War, workers, supported by communists, left-nationalists, and Muslim Brothers engaged in a series of economic and political strikes and protests, which induced nationwide class organizations and forms of consciousness such as the National Committee for Workers and Students (NCWS) and the Congress of Egyptian Trade Unions (CETU).⁴⁸⁸ The coalescence of the workers’ and nationalist movement constructed a new national-popular counter-bloc with the trade unions, the communist and left-nationalist *effendiyya*, and the Muslim Brotherhood as its “hard core”.

The pragmatic stance of the Brotherhood leadership towards the neo-colonial State led to a growing dissatisfaction among its younger and more radical members who engaged in “guerrilla warfare” as opposed to the movement’s official “war of position”.⁴⁸⁹ *Ikhwan* members organized attacks on British administrators, military personnel, Egyptian police stations, and, after 1948,

⁴⁸⁴ Clawson 1978: 21. See also Vitalis 1990 for a discussion on “nationalist” vs. “comprador” capitalists.

⁴⁸⁵ Farah 2009: 31.

⁴⁸⁶ However, they did not have a conception of capitalism as a transformative mode of production, but only as a technical means of “catching up” with the West.

⁴⁸⁷ “Thus, the full co-operation between purely Egyptian and local foreign elements of the local bourgeoisie was not accompanied by a similar co-operation between the Egyptian urban middle class and the petty bourgeoisie and their local foreign counterparts. On the contrary, they remained at loggerheads, and perhaps the antagonism at those levels even increased.” (Deeb 1974: 82)

⁴⁸⁸ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 345.

⁴⁸⁹ For example, in 1942 Hassan al-Banna decided to withdraw from parliamentary elections in exchange for tougher legislation against prostitution and alcohol. (Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 377; Mitchell, 1993: 19-22; Lia, 1998: 267-9).

Jewish targets. Even though Hassan al-Banna openly condemned these acts of terrorism, the Brotherhood leader was assassinated by government agents in 1949. The Society was declared illegal and four thousand of its members were arrested and detained. With the election of Hassan al-Hudaybi as the new Supreme Guide of the organization, the divisions between reformists and radicals within the movement escalated. Al-Hudaybi supported the pro-British King and denounced the idea of a revolutionary overthrow of the neo-colonial State, while rank-and-file Brothers joined the “war of movement” of the newly emerging national-popular counter-bloc.⁴⁹⁰

However, the counter-bloc was not able to defeat the neo-colonial State. Even in the 1950s, the Egyptian working class in general – despite the emergence of independent trade unionism since the 1940s – was still *relatively* inexperienced and unorganized in comparison with its vanguard of textile workers. Workers were not able to develop a unitary, coherent, and centralized trade union movement, let alone a political hegemonic apparatus in less than a decade. Moreover, the workers’ movement remained isolated from the peasantry⁴⁹¹ and lacked a unified leadership with a clear class point of view.⁴⁹² Furthermore, the vacillating support of the Muslim Brotherhood for the emancipation of the subaltern classes;⁴⁹³ undermined the coherence and unity of the national-popular counter-bloc.⁴⁹⁴ Lastly, the Egyptian communist movement failed to constitute a genuine and systematic dialectical pedagogy between workers and other subaltern forces – such as farmers – and between organic and traditional intellectuals. Because of Stalinist dogmatism there was a tendency to subjugate the class struggle to the national liberation movement, as Joel Beinin explained:

⁴⁹⁰ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 389-94; Lia 1998: 270-1; Mitchell 1993: 34-90.

⁴⁹¹ In the context of Italy – with its dichotomy between an industrial North and an agricultural South – Gramsci had emphasized that the only way of overcoming both the capitalist exploitation and pre-capitalist “backwardness” of the Italian social formation was through the constitution of a united front between Northern workers and Southern peasants. (Gramsci 2005: 28) Despite many important differences, there are some striking similarities between Italy’s uneven and combined character in the early twentieth century, and the nature of the Egyptian social formation after the Second World War. As a hegemonic strategy, the construction of a counter-bloc which incorporated the peasant masses seemed imperative in both cases.

⁴⁹² Beinin and Lockman 1987: 455.

⁴⁹³ Ibid. 349-62.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. 455.

Although historically the Marxist intelligentsia encouraged the formation of trade unions and other forms of working class organization and struggle, it also imposed its own agenda on the working class and consistently subordinated class struggle to the anti-imperialist national struggle... the immediate significance of the working class as a historical and political subject was considered to be its potential contribution as the vanguard of a national united front whose objective was to free Egypt from military occupation by Great Britain and economic domination by Europe and its local "feudalist" allies.⁴⁹⁵

The counter-bloc that the communist movement imagined was based on an alliance between workers and the "progressive national bourgeoisie", a leftist-nationalist hegemony, the domination of foreign and landed capital, and a strategy of accumulation based on "productive", "national" capitalism. Just as the nationalists before them, the communist intelligentsia assisted the emerging worker Subject in a colonizing way, appropriating its particular forms of activity, organization, and mobilization for its own purpose of national liberation. Beinín argued that by bereaving the workers' movement of its own immanent Project: *"...the Marxist Left inadvertently contributed to the disorganization and disorientation of the labor movement during the regime of Abdel Nasser."⁴⁹⁶*

Up to 1952 strikes, protests, riots and insurrections destabilized the neo-colonial historical bloc. It disorganized the State, but it was not able to offer an alternative of its own. As the counter-bloc was not able to achieve civil and political hegemony, let alone conquer State power, the societal stalemate was forcefully resolved by mediation of a third force: the "Free Officers".

⁴⁹⁵ Beinín 1996: 254; See also Beinín and Lockman: 1987: 572.

⁴⁹⁶ Beinín 1996: 255.

CHAPTER 8

Nasserism

*The problem is to see whether in the dialectic “revolution/restoration” it is revolution or restoration which predominates; for it is certain that in the movement of history there is never any turning back, and that restorations **in toto** do not exist.*

Gramsci on Caesarism, Prison Notebooks (1971: 219-220)

The Nasserist Intervention

A spontaneous popular insurrection on 25 January 1952 in Cairo led to a mass repression of trade union and communist leaders. Whereas the State’s violent coercion successfully weakened the proletarian vanguard of the national-popular bloc, it also revealed its own feeble grasp over Egypt’s “gelatinous” civil society. Lacking any significant ethico-political dimension to their rule, the dominant classes had to rely increasingly on coercion to control the population. However, sections of the Egyptian police and armed forces had also joined the counter-hegemonic mobilization, weakening the domination by the neo-colonial bloc. After the 25 January insurrection, the rule of the neo-colonial classes had, for all purposes, ended, but their adversaries of the national-popular bloc were not able to fill the power vacuum. Central State power was disorganized, but not replaced. The political void lasted for six months until the so-called Free Officers of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, organized a coup on 23 July 1952.

The Free Officers appeared on the political scene as a *deus ex machina*, promising to forcefully solve Egypt’s Gordian knot. Most members of the RCC came from a petty-bourgeois background,⁴⁹⁷ and their demands expressed the goals of the national-popular bloc.⁴⁹⁸ They formulated a “classic” program of national-democratic demands: democracy; social justice; abolishment of feudalism; establishment of a strong, national army; and full independence and sovereignty for Egypt.⁴⁹⁹ The main predicament for the nation’s development was

⁴⁹⁷ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 127.

⁴⁹⁸ See Gramsci: “In a whole series of countries, therefore, military influence in national life means not only the influence and weight of the military in the technical sense, but the influence and weight of the social stratum from which the latter (especially the junior officers) mostly derives its origin.” (1971: 214)

⁴⁹⁹ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 417-8; Khafaji 2004: 199.

grasped as the twin evils of imperialism and feudalism, and the military clique around Nasser sought to create a new historical bloc that subjugated these social and political forces to their rule.

After the coup, a power struggle within the military clique ensued, which was expressed in terms of the character of the new national-popular bloc. Whereas Nasser dominated the RCC and the army, General Muhammad Naguib enjoyed the support of the *Ikhwan*, the Left, and the *Wafd*. Naguib aimed to reduce the military intervention to a minimum and advocated a return to civil rule. Nasser, however, claimed that this withdrawal represented a return to the societal stalemate. Only a strong, homogeneous, and centralized national-popular Project could overcome Egypt's predicaments. Against pro-Naguib popular mass demonstrations, Nasser mobilized loyal trade union leaders, whom he integrated in the new State machine.⁵⁰⁰ The strike of the Cairo transport workers on 27-28 March "...was a decisive contribution to the RCC's ability to turn back the tide of popular opinion, consolidate the power of 'Abd al-Nasir, and confirm the continuation of military rule."⁵⁰¹ By 1954 Nasser emerged victorious and consolidated his rule.⁵⁰²

National Sovereignty

The ideology of the Nasserist bloc was to a large extent a continuation and expansion of the theory of the grassroots national-popular counter-bloc. The twin problems of imperialism and feudalism were understood as the consequences of geopolitical subordination and economic underdevelopment. In order to overcome feudalism, Egypt had to be industrialized. In order to industrialize, the nation had to be able to overcome its subaltern position within the world economy. Full national sovereignty was the key to overcoming Egypt's predicament.

Although an agreement in 1954 between Egypt and Britain, to demilitarize and evacuate the Suez Canal region and revert control of the canal to the Egyptian State, stipulated a phased and conditional withdrawal of troops and personnel, Nasser had to achieve national sovereignty much quicker, if he wanted to consolidate his prestige as leader of the national-popular bloc. In addition, the

⁵⁰⁰ See below.

⁵⁰¹ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 440.

⁵⁰² Al-Shakry 2011a.

creation of Israel in 1948 and its consolidation as a nation state were perceived as a direct threat against Egyptian and Arab sovereignty. As a directive force, the Free Officers had to prove that they were able to defend the country against British and Israeli imperialist forces. The emerging bipolar world order offered Nasser a road to achieve these goals. Both the USA and the USSR sought strong allies in the region against each other. Nasser aimed to balance between the two super powers, creating the necessary geopolitical space for national sovereignty.⁵⁰³

Concerning the “problem” of Israel, Nasser hoped to buy arms from the USA. However, his strong anti-Zionist stance blocked any possibility of USA Congress approving a sell of military material to Egypt. Nasser then turned to the USSR, which sold him weapons through the Czech arms deal in 1955. The following year the USA retaliated by withdrawing its financial support for the Aswan Dam project. Nasser immediately reacted with the nationalization of the Suez Canal. A tripartite of British, French and Israeli forces invaded Egypt in October 1956 to neutralize what they had come to perceive as a fundamental danger to their interests in the region. However, diplomatic and financial pressure by the USA, along with military threats by the Soviet Union, forced the tripartite to withdraw their forces.⁵⁰⁴ Even though the Egyptian military had been defeated, Nasser emerged victorious from the conflict, strengthening national sovereignty, the prestige of Egypt in the Arab world, and his own position within the new historical bloc.

Politics of Development

The Nasserist bloc aimed to overcome “feudalism” by industrial development and agricultural reforms. As early as September 1952 the new regime undertook a number of important rural reforms in its war against feudalism. Land size was capped to 200 *feddans*⁵⁰⁵ per owner and 300 per family. Subsequent land reforms in 1961, 1963, and 1969 redistributed some twelve percent of cultivable lands among landless and near landless *fellahin*.⁵⁰⁶ Rents were limited to seven times the

⁵⁰³ Gaddis 1997: 167-72.

⁵⁰⁴ Alteras 1993.

⁵⁰⁵ One feddan is 1.038 acres or 0.42 hectares. (Bush 2007: 1601)

⁵⁰⁶ Bush 2007: 1601.

land tax.⁵⁰⁷ An agricultural minimum wage was implemented. Peasants gained the right of perpetual tenancy at controlled rents, which severely restricted the ownership rights of the feudal landlords.⁵⁰⁸ The position of landlords in the agricultural credit cooperatives – which supervised “...cropping patters, input supplies, credit provision and marketing...”⁵⁰⁹ – was replaced by State employees. This measure restricted the political influence of the landlords and formally excluded them as participants in the newly emerging Nasserist historical bloc.⁵¹⁰

For the Free Officers, expropriation, land reform, and rent control served three interconnected goals: (1) weakening the economic power base of the monarchy and the feudal landlords;⁵¹¹ (2) increasing productivity in agriculture and freeing capital for industrial development;⁵¹² (3) gathering support from peasants for its own political project.⁵¹³ The land reforms did not eradicate the political and economic role of landlords in the Egyptian social formation, however: “Dispossessed landowners received compensation, private property persisted, large landowners found ways of retaining their land: there was ultimately very little fundamental shift in the balance of political and economic power.”⁵¹⁴

In the Nasserist bloc, the rationale of industrial development was purely political and served to strengthen national sovereignty – an economic means to “catch up” with the Western nations.⁵¹⁵ At first, the State merely acted as the midwife of “spontaneous” industrial development by private actors.⁵¹⁶ Roughly from 1954 until 1960 the State diligently defended the interests of the Egyptian industrial bourgeoisie.⁵¹⁷ The government encouraged both domestic and foreign industrial investments by lowering corporate taxes and relaxing protectionist measures. By establishing public-private committees – such as the Permanent Council for the Development of National Production – to steer national

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. 1601.

⁵⁰⁸ Beinin 2001: 132; 162.

⁵⁰⁹ Bush 2007: 1601.

⁵¹⁰ Aoude 1994.

⁵¹¹ Al-Shakry 2011a; Beinin 1989a: 72; Mitchell 2002: 43. However, the process was firmly controlled “from above” and spontaneous attempts of the peasantry to seize lands of large landholders were violently suppressed. (Marfleet 2011)

⁵¹² Chaichian 1988: 35.

⁵¹³ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming]

⁵¹⁴ Bush 2007: 1601.

⁵¹⁵ Chaichian 1988: 35.

⁵¹⁶ Beinin 1989a: 73.

⁵¹⁷ Al-Shakry 2011a; Johnson 1973: 4.

development the State cast itself in the role of impartial facilitator.⁵¹⁸ However, neither domestic nor foreign capitalists were interested in industrialization. Between 1950 and 1956 private investments dropped by 300 percent.⁵¹⁹ Step by step the State itself was forced to take the economic initiative: *“In 1952-1953, 72 percent of gross capital formation took place in the private sector. By 1959-1960, the state was responsible for 74 percent of gross capital formation.”*⁵²⁰

Geopolitically-motivated foreign aid and economic assistance on the one hand, and the contingent sequestration of private assets on the other, allocated capital and expertise necessary for industrialization to the State, which became the primary economic actor. The building of the Aswan High Dam illustrated the logic of expanding State intervention in the economy. At first, the Free Officers aimed to encourage domestic private actors to invest in the project through the public-private committees mentioned above. The reluctance of the “indigenous” industrial capitalists to invest in a long-term project with a low rate of profit forced the State to turn to foreign capital. When a World Bank loan was blocked by the USA because of the Egyptian-Czechoslovakian arms deal in 1955, the State looked for other sources of revenue and expertise, which eventually led to the Suez Crisis of 1956-1957 and a rapprochement with the Soviet Union. The sequestration of foreign assets after the Suez Crisis enabled the state to embark on an industrial plan that aimed to build a basic industry. In 1957 and 1958 Egypt received loans and technical know-how from the Soviet Union to build the High Dam.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Aoude 1994.

⁵¹⁹ Farah 2009: 33.

⁵²⁰ Beinin 1989a: 79.

⁵²¹ Farah 2009: 33–5. Soviet technical assistance reinforced the prestige of “socialism from above” as a means to overcome feudalism and imperialism. Fakhry Labib of the African-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) recalled that: *“...the Soviet Union did good things for Egypt: the High Dam, industry, educating people to become doctors, engineers and so on; circus, cinema, ballet, ... The Soviet Union did for Egypt a lot of good things. We were suffering from our own rulers, not from the Soviet Union. I am a geologist, and I was working with Soviet experts, and they did very good work for us. They were working as hard as the Egyptians or even harder. So when you remember them, you remember them as people who were good to you. They were giving us new cars while in the USSR they were riding old cars... To the Egyptians the Soviet Union was to them a country which could defend them against America and Europe. Now, nobody is defending them. So the Soviet Union has a good reputation, not a bad one. Even the bourgeoisie speaks of the USSR – from their point of interest at least – that as long as there was the Soviet Union they had good relations, money, ... because then there was a competition [between the USA and the USSR], and they were making good use of this contradiction.”* (Interview with Fakhry Labib, Cairo, 17 February 2008)

In 1959 the First Five-Year Plan for the whole economy was formulated. The Plan acknowledged an already existing reality as it established the public sector as the dominant industrial producer and investor. The Egyptian textile sector spearheaded a project of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), which was expected to create a domestic demand for spinning and weaving machinery, which, in turn, needed locally produced iron and steel. Between 1952 and 1960 the number of wage laborers working in manufacture increased with 23.5 percent – more than half of which were employed in the textile industry.⁵²²

An anti-Nasserist bourgeois revolt in Syria and the disinclination of the private sector to support the Five-Year Plan led to the Socialist Decrees of 1961, through which, at once, large-scale industry, banking, insurance, foreign trade, utilities, marine transport, airlines, many hotels and department stores were nationalized.⁵²³ Rather than a preconceived plan, the increasing role of the State and the expansion of the public sector was an unintended, but logical outcome of, on the one hand, the reluctance of domestic capital groups to support Nasser's industrialization project and, on the other, the restructuring of geopolitics after the Second World War. The "Socialist" Decrees qualitatively deepened the intervention and direction of the political State in the economic structure, and connected this policy to that of the Soviet geopolitical bloc. Moreover, the "socialist" turn of the Nasserist bloc also entailed a more profound integration of subaltern Subjects, especially industrial workers, into the authoritarian national-popular Project. The key concept of "democratic cooperative socialism" was Egyptian and Arab **unity**, from which all other political and economic ideological notions, such as egalitarianism and social justice, were derived.⁵²⁴

Prince or Pharaoh?

Subsumption of the Worker Subject

Despite their adherence to the Project of the national-popular bloc, the Free Officers forcefully blocked the independent development of its supporting social Subjects. Less than a month in power, the RCC government violently repressed a

⁵²² Beinin 1989: 77.

⁵²³ Aoude 1994.

⁵²⁴ Akhavi 1975.

strike at Kafr al-Dawwar, hanging two worker leaders.⁵²⁵ The worker Subject was integrated into the Nasserist bloc, but, under the slogan of “Unity, Order, and Labor”⁵²⁶, in a colonizing way that obliterated its autonomous trade unionist organizations. Nasserist hegemony over the workers’ movement was secured by coercive consent: through a combination of unilateral and far-reaching social reforms, repression of organic intellectuals, and State-led corporatism, grassroots proletarian Subjectivities were subsumed under the top-down nationalist Subjectivity of the State’s Project.⁵²⁷ Strikes and independent worker actions were prohibited,⁵²⁸ but proletarian bargaining power – previously defended by the organically developed independent trade unions – was from 1957 on secured by the State-controlled General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU).⁵²⁹ Labor historian Anne Alexander summarized the dual hegemonic role of the Nasserist unions in civil and political society:

*...as organs of social control they channelled benefits such as access to workplace-based social welfare schemes to workers and worked hand in glove with state employers to enforce “social peace” within the workplace. As organs of political control they acted as an electoral machine for the ruling party, controlling nominations for the 50 percent of seats in parliament which were reserved for “workers and peasants”, and a mechanism for mobilising a stage army of apparently loyal regime supporters whenever the regime felt it needed to make a show of its “mass base”. Consistent with both of these roles the trade union bureaucracy acted ruthlessly in concert with the repressive apparatus of the state to crush workers’ attempts to organise collective action and build their own independent organisations.*⁵³⁰

Unilateral concessions towards the workers’ social conditions softened class contradictions in the industrial sphere. In exchange for syndical and political passivity, the workers gained social reforms and rights such as a 42 hour

⁵²⁵ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 418.

⁵²⁶ Ibid. 431.

⁵²⁷ Al-Shakry 2011a.

⁵²⁸ This does not mean that there were no worker protests under Nasserism – on the contrary, strike actions increased in comparison to the pre-1952 period. (Beinin 1989a: 77) However, without the directive and organizational framework of independent trade unions, these actions remained fragmented and isolated. After the 1956 Suez crisis, leftist trade union leaders tried to “countercolonize” Nasserism by presenting “... the working class as the vanguard of the national united front against imperialism.” (Ibid. 83)

⁵²⁹ Bayat 1993: 68.

⁵³⁰ Alexander 2012.

working-week, higher wages, social security, free healthcare, protection against arbitrary dismissal, and education.⁵³¹ Even in the private sector, the government enforced minimum wage standards and protective laws.⁵³² In the public sector, the introduction of workers' participation or co-management had the objective of integrating the working class in the national project, softening class contradictions, and raising productivity. In reality it was participation without the right to debate or disagree. Industrial power relations did not change and the trade union leadership and the workers' representatives were integrated in the State bureaucracy.⁵³³ The bureaucratization of the trade unions "...drained them of their fighting spirit, and made them incapable of confronting Sadat's open door policy..."⁵³⁴ The Nasserist hegemonic strategy of coercive consent vis-à-vis the working class would remain more or less in place until Mubarak's neoliberal offensive in the 1990s. Marsha Posusney argued that:

*Although moving quickly to suppress workers' protests with force, Egyptian authorities have almost always given in to some or all of the workers' demands. At the same time, only the largest incidents are ever covered in the official press, and these are customarily blamed on outside agitators. Preventing any escalation of the protest and maintaining an image of national harmony and worker satisfaction seem to be far more important to Egypt's rulers than minimizing financial concessions.*⁵³⁵

The reluctance of the bourgeoisie to play its part in the industrialization process and the rapprochement with the Soviet Union strengthened corporatist structures and stimulated an increasingly radicalizing anti-imperialist and socialistic rhetoric. The agent of "Arab socialism" was, in theory, the "alliance of working forces", consisting of peasants, wage workers, urban intellectuals and professionals, national capitalists, and the military. However, in practice, the popular masses were the object of authoritarian regime policies instead of an independent political actor. Despite the improved living conditions and social status⁵³⁶ of "the industrial worker" in Egyptian society, the proletarian Subject

⁵³¹ Clément 2009: 103.

⁵³² Posusney 1996: 218.

⁵³³ Bayat 1993: 68-74.

⁵³⁴ Beinin 1996: 255.

⁵³⁵ Posusney 1996: 216.

⁵³⁶ Beinin 1989a: 85.

was reduced to an economic-corporate state and a position of subalternity in the Nasserist bloc.

Destruction of the *Ikhwan*

Supreme Guide al-Hudaybi condemned the spontaneous popular uprising in Cairo on January 25 1952. Officially the Muslim Brotherhood did not support the insurrection, although individual members were active within the mass movement. The coup of the Free Officers was welcomed by the Supreme Guide as a means to solve the societal chaos, while rank-and-file *Ikhwan* saw the RCC as the harbinger of decolonization. Conversely, the Free Officers leaned on its support to deal blows to the Wafdist and communist movements.⁵³⁷ In 1953 the new government banned all parties except for the Brotherhood, which remained loyal to the RCC. The *Ikhwan* were asked to join the unitary “Liberation Rally” party, and as a token of goodwill al-Hudaybi dissolved the Society’s paramilitary “Secret Apparatus” and kicked its leaders out of the organization. During the power struggle between Nasser and Naguib in late 1953 and 1954, the Brotherhood first sided with Naguib, but then switched to the Nasser camp.⁵³⁸ In exchange for its support, the Brotherhood demanded an Islamic constitution, democratic institutions, freedom of press, and an end to emergency law. As Nasser was not inclined to share power, a number of *Ikhwan* members secretly founded a new paramilitary cell, which tried to assassinate the President on 26 October 1954. The attempt failed, but it gave Nasser a perfect alibi to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood as a competitor for power.⁵³⁹

During the wave of repression that began in 1954 the Society broke up into three parts. A first group consisted of *Ikhwan* militants who were imprisoned. Their main leader and ideologue was Sayyid Qutb, who translated the experiences of torture and abuse in the camps in a radicalization of the Brotherhood’s worldview. For him, the inhumanity and violence of the prison keepers signified that they were no longer Muslims, but idolizers of the Nasserist State.⁵⁴⁰ According to Qutb, contemporary Muslim societies, even though they

⁵³⁷ Alexander 2011c: 535.

⁵³⁸ Ibid. 541.

⁵³⁹ Beinín and Lockman 1987: 412-20; Mitchell 1993: 92-115. However, it isn’t clear if the assassination plot was devised by rogue *Ikhwan*, or set up by Nasser himself to discredit the Society. See Burgat 1995: 40.

⁵⁴⁰ Zemni 2006: 79.

claimed to be Islamic, were (still) in a state of *jahiliyya*: religious ignorance.⁵⁴¹ The traditional reformist strategy of the Brotherhood was doomed to fail in a context of *jahiliyya* and had to be replaced by an intellectual and a collective *jihād*: a moral, intellectual and political Project of personal and societal Islamization. A vanguard of righteous Islamists should educate the masses until the majority of Muslims participated in the Islamic Project.⁵⁴²

A second group was comprised of Muslim Brothers who were not detained but nonetheless remained in Egypt. They were led by Zaynab al-Ghazali and Abd al-Fattah Ismail, who reorganized the movement according to the reformist ideals of Hassan al-Banna.

A third faction, under the guidance of Shukri Mustafa, founded the *takfir wa-l-hijra* group whose members advocated either a physical or ideological escape from *jahiliyya*; either they withdrew from their community, or they continued to participate while hiding their nature as “true” Muslims.⁵⁴³

A fourth group migrated to the Gulf countries, where they were strongly influenced by the social conservatism of Wahhabism. Those who became successful businessmen returned to Sadat’s Egypt in the 1970s, constituting the backbone of the “Islamic” bourgeoisie.⁵⁴⁴

The inability or unwillingness of Nasser to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood into his authoritarian historical bloc would lead to its resurgence, almost *ex nihilo*, under Sadat in the 1970s. The repression and sundering of the Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s laid the foundation of the three “modern” forms of Islamism in Egypt: Qutb’s radical Islamism mutated into jihadism; the apolitical reformism of *takfir wa-l-hijra* transformed into puritanical salafism; and petro-Islam grew into bourgeois Islamism. Lastly, the civil-democratic movement of the 2000s and the 25 January Revolution of 2011 rallied a fourth and almost forgotten form of “social movement” Islamism that had its historical roots in the pre-Nasserist national-popular bloc.

⁵⁴¹ Qutb’s theoretical innovation was that he conceived of the historical category of *jahiliyya* – the age of pre-Islamic ignorance – as the continuous predicament of any society which did not fully embrace Islam. (Zemni 2006: 82)

⁵⁴² Mitchell 1993:141; Kepel 1985:38; Zemni 2006: 85-6. The concept of *jihād* which Qutb advanced resembled “Islamic hegemony”: the capacity of an Islamic social group to direct, educate and organize society.

⁵⁴³ Zemni 2006: 95.

⁵⁴⁴ Beinin 2005a: 118

Nasser and the Left

As a “new” and “unexpected” phenomenon, the Nasserist coup and the formation of the authoritarian national-popular bloc sowed confusion among the Egyptian Left. The largest communist organization, the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL) supported the Free Officers in 1952, as it saw them as an anti-imperialist force.⁵⁴⁵ The government’s subsequent violent crackdown on communist activists pushed the movement into the opposition camp. Unilateral labor reforms in December 1952, and the subsumption of trade unionist leaderships under the new Liberation Rally party, however, weakened the class base of communist and leftist nationalist political activists, which had united in the National Democratic Front (NDF).⁵⁴⁶ As I discussed before, in 1954 Nasser used the subsumed trade unions as a social force in the streets against the popular demonstrations that called for a democratization of the regime. This episode demonstrated clearly the distorted class base of the new Nasserist bloc.

By 1956 the RCC had distanced itself from the USA and moved towards a position of “non-alignment”. All communist factions agreed to support Nasser’s Project. There was a clear tendency among communists to subordinate the struggle for democracy and socialism to the formation of a “popular front” against imperialism. The only substantial political difference between nationalists and communists was the latter’s emphasis on the vanguard role of the working class.⁵⁴⁷ However, a conflict between Nasser and the Iraqi communists in 1958 created a divide within the Egyptian communist movement, with a majority taking the side of their Iraqi comrades.⁵⁴⁸

The Nasserite’s bloc “socialist turn” from 1960 onwards, was devised by Nasser as a political instrument to counterbalance the right, especially the influence of the old elites. Even though the old elites were bereft of formal political power and direct control over the State apparatus, the military clique had not completely destroyed the economic base of their class power. Private capital withdrew itself in the economic domains of landed property, real estate, internal trade, and construction. Their grip over the countryside, as well as new alliances with high-ranked officers and bureaucrats, enabled the old ruling classes

⁵⁴⁵ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 427.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. 435.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid. 575-7.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid. 580-1.

to influence the political decision making process through informal networks and channels. Changes in the internal political make-up of the regime – such as the formation of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) in 1962, the foundation of a Marxist cadre school (Egyptian Socialist Youth) in 1965, and the removal of pro-capitalist ministers from government – accompanied socialistic economic initiatives and improved relations with the Soviet Union.⁵⁴⁹ When in 1964 communist prisoners were released, the two biggest communist organizations voluntarily dissolved themselves into the ASU.⁵⁵⁰

As long as the Nasserist State was able to “nourish” its subaltern allies into an economic-corporate state by social and economic reforms, by building its hegemonic apparatus, and by presenting itself as capable of leading Egyptian society forward, it remained a hegemonic force. However, the internal economic contradictions of the system and the loss of political prestige in the 1967 Six Day War, caused the slow breakdown of the Nasserist bloc.⁵⁵¹

Today, leftist activists are still wrestling with the political heritage of Nasserism, for the regime appeared as both a social revolutionary and a political reactionary force. For example, Geber Serkis, a leader of the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party in Mahalla, claimed that:

Gamal Abd al-Nasser, when he was the President of Egypt, gave [the workers] a lot of rights and he made many laws to support and help them, for example he gave them a margin of the profits and allowed them to participate in the boards of the companies and factories and the leadership of the trade unions. One of the most important points in Nasserist program is the defense of the workers... Gamal Abd al-Nasser established that 50 percent of parliament should consist of workers and farmers. Today this is no longer the case, but during Nasser's regime they were real workers and farmers.⁵⁵²

Whereas Abir Mehdawi, a young leftist journalist, denied Nasser any progressive role:

He arrested and detained my grandfather, he was against all forms of protest and opposition and locked many people away. He promised a big change in the economy, in civic liberties, etc, but in the end he did nothing. Under King Farouk

⁵⁴⁹ Johnson 1973: 4.

⁵⁵⁰ Beinun and Lockman 1987: 583-4.

⁵⁵¹ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming].

⁵⁵² Interview with Geber Serkis, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

*society was more free, although, of course, there was the British occupation. The last real national uprising was under Saad Zaghlul. When Naguib took power, it seemed he was alright. Nasser fucked up and showed Sadat and Mubarak after him the way.*⁵⁵³

I also remember a discussion with a group of young leftist activists in May 2009 during a gathering in *Afaaq Ishtirakiyya* (Socialist Horizons), the NGO-type front organization of the illegal Egyptian Communist Party. Some youth, both socialists and left-nationalists, defended Nasser because of his welfare and anti-imperialist politics. For them, Nasser remained a mobilizing symbol of socialism and liberation, and this iconicity was physically present in the offices of *Afaaq Ishtirakiyya* and *Tagammu*. In fact, our debate had started because of the saliency of his picture on the wall. The intellectual roots of this “positive” perspective could be traced back to 1960s and 1970s narratives of Nasserism and similar “interventions” in the region that, in general, presented the military as a progressive and transformative force.⁵⁵⁴ In the absence of a strong, progressive, national bourgeoisie the “modern” military – and its petty bourgeois class base⁵⁵⁵ – was the only social force that could and would substitute itself for the national-democratic and anti-colonial Subject.

Other leftists in *Afaaq Ishtirakiyya* claimed that Nasser laid the foundations of the authoritarianism of Sadat and Mubarak, and that he was rather a tyrant than a liberator. Yet in their denouncing of Nasserism they unintentionally shared with the intellectuals from the liberal tradition a utopian vision of the pre-Nasserist constitutional monarchy, which was presented as a period of civil rights, freedom, and democracy. Their arguments were derived from the political and academic critiques of the developmental, military⁵⁵⁶, and democratic failures of the “Arab socialist” States that emerged from the 1970s onwards.⁵⁵⁷

Lastly, a few militants advanced a more circumspect image of Nasserism, pointing towards the dual character of the authoritarian popular bloc. This ambiguity is echoed by liberal intellectuals such as the novelist Alaa al-Aswany:

⁵⁵³ Interview with Abir Mehdawi, Cairo, 13 April 2009.

⁵⁵⁴ Hurewitz 1969; Vatikiotis 1972.

⁵⁵⁵ See Halpern 1963.

⁵⁵⁶ Especially Egypt’s defeat in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967.

⁵⁵⁷ Picard 1990: 198-9. Others conceived of the military coups as forms of premodern continuity rather than modernist change. For example, Perlmutter (1974) argued that Egypt had always been a “praetorian state” in which elites constructed their rule “on top of” the existing society.

I do not think it was a coup, rather a coup supported by a real revolution. Nasser was a great leader and he did very positive things for Egypt. I cannot feel it myself because I am coming from the upper-middle class in Egypt; I was educated in French schools, and my parents and grandparents could always afford to give me the best education, but many Egyptian had for the first time the opportunity to enjoy a good education, healthcare, food, because of Nasser's revolution. So I don't think it's fair to forget this. But also we shouldn't forget that the current dictatorship and regime is based on Nasser. Everything: the security state, the control system, the elections... everything is based on this regime. The irony is that he established a dictatorship while he didn't need it. Nasser was supported to the extent that in any free elections he would have easily gained a majority. That was not the case with the presidents who came after him. He was the one who built the dictatorship machine. And the problem with this machine is that everyone can use it. Everything is ready for the dictatorship, the security, the torture. If you are in the driving seat you just push the button and the regime will keep on running.⁵⁵⁸

Al-Aswany offered us a glimpse of the contradictions that were at the core of the Nasserist bloc. The birth of the regime was “a coup supported by a real revolution”. These two contradictory forces constituted the nature of the Nasserist bloc.

Passive Revolution?

With regard to the Nasserist intervention, neither “coup” nor “revolution” appear as sufficient and adequate concepts to understand the contradictory phenomenon. According to Omnia al-Shakry, the Nasserist intervention was a “passive revolution”:

*This social welfare model can be seen as a Faustian bargain in which “the people” exchanged democratic political liberties and a more radical restructuring of the social order for social welfare programs that deflected attention away from the restructuring of class relations, by emphasizing the piecemeal and palliative reforms for the laboring classes. In other words, it was a **passive revolution**.⁵⁵⁹*

I do not agree with al-Shakry. The term “passive revolution” was first deployed by Gramsci to understand the *Risorgimento* as a process of revolutionizing but non-revolutionary self-transformation of the Italian State. Afterwards, he expanded its meaning: “The concept of passive revolution, it seems to me, applies not

⁵⁵⁸ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2010.

⁵⁵⁹ Al-Shakry 2011a. Emphasis in original.

only to Italy but also to those countries that modernize the state through a series of reforms or national wars without undergoing a political revolution of a radical Jacobin-type.”⁵⁶⁰ Passive revolution came to denote a whole epoch of bourgeois class rule after the failed revolutions of 1848. In this period the revolutionary optimism of the bourgeoisie was shattered by the spontaneous uprisings of the same subaltern classes that had supported its coming to power in 1789. The revolts revealed the particular interests behind the bourgeoisie’s “universal” political project, but the subaltern Subjects were unable to forge a hegemony of their own, leaving the ruling classes in power. Losurdo summarized the meaning of “passive revolution” as:

*...the persistent capacity of initiative of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce socio-political transformations, sometimes of significance, conserving in its own hands power, initiative and hegemony, and leaving the working classes in their condition of subalternity.*⁵⁶¹

Furthermore, Morton explained the connection between the phenomenon of passive revolution on the national and the international “level” from the perspective of uneven and combined development:

*Instances of different passive revolution can thus be understood as part of a cumulative process of historically linked state formation moments within the world market order of capitalism and the international states-system. Incorporated comparison encapsulates the method of viewing processes of passive revolution as **specific** instances of state transition that are internally related through the **general** world-historical conditions of uneven and combined development. Different historically peculiar **national** processes of passive revolution across the postcolonial world can therefore be traced as connected variants within the **international** conditions of world capitalism.*⁵⁶²

Returning to the Egyptian case, in a superficial analysis it would be tempting to label Nasserism as a passive revolution. The outcome of Nasserism and Gramsci’s passive revolution was the same: “The result was a process of fundamental social change but without an attempt to embrace the interests of subordinate classes.”⁵⁶³

⁵⁶⁰ Gramsci 1996: 232.

⁵⁶¹ Losurdo in Thomas 2009:147.

⁵⁶² Morton 2007: 71. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶³ Ibid. 64.

For Gramsci, however, passive revolution was the ability of the bourgeoisie to continue to reform the State in an era where its ethico-political legitimacy had been compromised. The transformation of the Italian and German social formations in the nineteenth century were passive revolutions because they were presided by a cynical capitalist class lacking a radical Jacobinian faction. Conversely, the Nasserist intervention was rather a partisan political act of Jacobinians who were not supported by their own bourgeoisie. The Nasserist Project may have been an authoritarian and a colonizing one, but it certainly had a strong ethico-political dimension up until the Six Day War of 1967. Passive revolutions are characterized by a weak hegemony; in fact, the main reason why a “passively revolutionizing” ruling class can cling to power is because of its successful fragmentation of oppositional Subjects. Returning to al-Aswany’s telling comment that: “Nasser was supported to the extent that in any free elections he would have easily gained a majority” – it becomes clear that the Nasserist bloc, despite its coercive practices, constituted a powerful hegemony.⁵⁶⁴

Lastly, from a global perspective, Nasserism was part of the tide of national liberation movements in the Third World, which saw the construction of national-popular blocs in the whole capitalist periphery. For many nations in the Global South, the real moment of passive revolution came in the 1970s, with the breakdown of Fordism in the West and the rise of neoliberal transnational blocs. Sadat, and not Nasser, represented the beginning of passive revolution in Egypt.

In order to understand the Nasserist intervention as a coup *and* a revolution, and as a transformation “initiated from above”, *but* “supported from below”, a concept is needed that expresses the contradictory character of the process. I argue that Gramsci offered such a concept in the shape of “Caesarism”.⁵⁶⁵

Caesarism

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx analyzed the process in which a State or State-faction bereaves the ruling classes of its direct and formal political power. The State appears to balance between the classes and gains a level of autonomy vis-à-vis its constituent class. However, it still articulates the interests of the ruling class

⁵⁶⁴ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2010.

⁵⁶⁵ For a similar (but brief) analysis of the role of Caesarism in the Global South see: Cox 1987: 192-197; 237-244. Cox described Nasserism as “radical Caesarism”. One of the main differences between Cox’s analysis and mine is that he conceived of Caesarism *in general* as the “instrumentality” of passive revolution, and not only its reactionary variant.

and acts as its diligent guardian. Gramsci elaborated upon the concept of “Bonapartism” through his concept of “Caesarism”, which:

...can be said to express a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction. When the progressive force A struggles with the reactionary force B, not only may A defeat B or B defeat A, but it may happen that neither A nor B defeats the other – that they bleed each other mutually and then a third force C intervenes from outside, subjugating what is left of both A and B.⁵⁶⁶

Gramsci noted that there were “progressive” and “reactionary” forms of Caesarism:

Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph – in this case too with certain compromises and limitations, which have, however, a different value, extent, and significance than in the former.⁵⁶⁷

Moreover, he distinguished between the “classic”, military form of Caesarism in nations without a fully developed civil and political society, and the modern type that can be brought about by the financial and political power of small groups or individuals.⁵⁶⁸ Lastly, he discussed the difference between “quantitative” and “qualitative” Caesarism. Whereas qualitative Caesarism changed and developed the form of the State, its quantitative variant was content with a mere continuation of existing State practices.⁵⁶⁹

Gramsci’s understanding of Caesarism helps to elucidate the ambiguous and contradictory character of Nasserism. The Free Officers’ intervention was an act of Caesarism because, as a semi-independent, “external” force, it was finally able to end the power struggle between the national-popular and the neo-colonial bloc – a fight that had remained undecided in the decade after the Second World War. The Free Officers’ coup was anticipated by years of social and political upheaval and the building of mass movements. Perhaps there was not yet a revolution, but

⁵⁶⁶ Gramsci 1971: 219.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid. Caesarism in its reactionary shape can thus become “the instrumentality” of a passive revolution – and this was the way in which Gramsci understood fascism. (Cox 1987: 192-7)

⁵⁶⁸ Gramsci 1971: 220.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. 222.

there was certainly a revolutionary movement and a movement towards revolution. Instead of the organic completion of the revolution, the coup captured central State power before the masses had matured into a Subject that could challenge the State. The Nasserist intervention “deflected”⁵⁷⁰ the revolution, and cut off the development of the popular masses towards a coherent political Subject: instead it offered its authoritarian direction as an alternative to the embryonic movement towards self-determination. Whatever the intentions or motives of the RCC, noble or opportunistic, its political intervention obstructed the development of the spontaneous mass movement as an activity-system with as its goal the revolutionary overthrow of the neo-colonial bloc.

The coup was relatively *progressive*, because the RCC took the side of the popular masses against feudalist and imperialist forces. This was reflected in the “national-democratic” program of the Free Officers’ and their subsequent policies of land reform, welfare, and education, which favored the subaltern classes.

Lastly, Nasserism was a *qualitative* form of Caesarism, as it transformed the Egyptian social formation in a revolutionary way. Industrialization went hand in hand with the massification of education and political mobilization. Although the Free Officers had delivered the death blow to the old neo-colonial bloc by using military force, they could and would not base their rule solely on coercion. In order to subsume the population into its authoritarian nationalist Project, the State first had to create the terrain of a modern civil society. The absorption of the existing, underdeveloped modern civil society, together with lingering pre-modern social forms into an expanding and developing political society also entailed the “massification” of these structures and practices. The political State created mass trade unions, professional syndicates, public companies, universities and schools, women, youth, and children organizations, cultural clubs, peasant associations, et cetera; drawing, for the first time in Egypt’s history, the majority of the population into the activity of a – tightly state-controlled – mass civil society. Just as the colonial era had produced the *effendiyya*, the expansion of modern education under Nasserism created a fresh layer of intellectuals who were embedded within the nationalist Project. Farida Na’ash stressed that women

⁵⁷⁰ Marfleet 2001. See Tony Cliff’s theory of the “deflected permanent revolution”: “While the conservative, cowardly nature of late-developing bourgeoisie is an **absolute law**, the revolutionary character of the young working class is neither absolute nor inevitable... An automatic correlation between economic backwardness and revolutionary political militancy does not exist.” (Cliff 1963)

were included as participants of civil and political life: *“There are three areas where women gained new rights during Nasser: political rights, the right to work and the right to be educated. Education was free during Nasser’s time and so all the poor people sent their daughters to the schools.”*⁵⁷¹

The Nasserist intervention initiated the development of a particular type of the modern integral State. The rule of the military clique was not only based upon its military domination, but also on its prestige and its economic and political direction of the Egyptian social formation. Similar to the French bourgeois State that emerged triumphantly from the revolution of 1789, the Nasserist project contained an ethico-political dimension, expressed in its populist, nationalist, “tiermondist” and eventually “Arab socialist” ideology, which mobilized and inspired the masses.

Despite its character as a *progressive* and *qualitative* Caesarism, from the perspective of the development of the working class as a Subject, the Nasserist era was a throwback. Blunden pointed out that, when the direct needs of a Subject, appropriate to its current SSoD, are met, this constitutes a constraint on its self-determination, and a developmental pathology may develop.⁵⁷² The combination of an atomization of the proletarian Subject and a paternalist “softening” of its economic predicament, led to an improvement of the immediate living conditions of the Egyptian workers, but, at the same time, it obstructed the autonomous development of the labor force as a social and political agent. Workers were reduced to the passive clients of what Draper called “octroyal socialism”: *“...the handing-down of changes from above, as against their conquest from below.”*⁵⁷³ The capture of the State apparatus allowed Nasser to keep the form of the national-popular counter-bloc, while radically transforming its internal balance of power through a combination of coercion and consent. The embryonic hegemonic apparatuses of the working class were destroyed. Worker leaders were detained, independent political and trade union organizations outlawed.

Nasser was not a “proletarian Prince”, but his rise to power on the waves of revolution and mass mobilization necessarily transformed him into a “popular Pharaoh”. While the subaltern classes were politically subordinated to the military dictatorship, the regime itself was heir to the class forces that generated

⁵⁷¹ Interview with Farida Na’ash, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

⁵⁷² Blunden 2010: 155-6.

⁵⁷³ Draper 1971: 101.

it. Nasserism was a product of revolutionary, popular mobilization and the dictatorship could not abandon its social base without forfeiting its ethico-political dimension.

State Capitalism

Pushing back both the forces of domestic feudalism and foreign imperialism, Nasserist progressive and qualitative Caesarism temporarily created a space for State-led accumulation and the development of the productive forces in Egypt. The rationale of Nasserist “state capitalism”⁵⁷⁴ was the inverse of the historical logic of capital in Western Europe. In Egypt, the goal of national development was pursued through the means of State-led capital accumulation, whereas in Western Europe the development of the productive forces was a by-product of profit-driven private accumulation.

Ironically, Nasser’s “Arab socialism” proved to be the most efficient way to appropriate and embed pre-capitalist social forms in capitalist relations of production.⁵⁷⁵ State-led industrialization, construction, and land reclamation projects absorbed the surplus population from the countryside and turned peasants into modern wage laborers. Between 1961 and 1967 the propertyless workforce increased from six to 7.3 million.⁵⁷⁶ This process of formal subsumption of labor under capital – the expansion of wage labor – was complemented with a real subsumption of labor under capital: the transformation and modernization of the labor process and the methods of production themselves thanks to the influx of new sources of capital and technical expertise.⁵⁷⁷ Real subsumption was introduced as a series of “political” State measures, instead of being the spontaneous “economic” outcome of a historical process. In order to maintain the

⁵⁷⁴ “Thus, Nasser’s “socialism” was nothing more than state capitalism, and as such was an attempt to concentrate and direct investment toward nonagricultural capitalist production.” (Chaichian 1988: 36)

⁵⁷⁵ The existence of a large public sector and State ownership are not in contradiction with the dominance of the capitalist mode of production: “The simple fact of public ownership does not mean that the profit motive disappears or that the workers gain control of the surplus value of their own labor.” (Richards and Waterbury 2008: 207)

⁵⁷⁶ Chaichian 1988: 39.

⁵⁷⁷ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming].

rate of accumulation⁵⁷⁸ the State had to dynamically reinvest the economic surplus and continuously revolutionize the means of production.⁵⁷⁹

The logic of the ISI strategy demanded capital-intensive industries, which, in their early stage of development, lacked the capacity to export competitive commodities. Despite the unintended process of “accumulation by dispossession”⁵⁸⁰ – the sequestration of foreign assets in 1956 and 1959 – and the loans and aid from the Soviet Union that had injected the Egyptian economy with a few strong, but limited, doses of capital, the State needed a steady source of surplus in order to perpetually expand and innovate its industries. State income could, in theory, be increased through an unequal exchange between agriculture and industry. Nasserist anti-feudal land reforms were aimed at creating a layer of small scale capitalist farmers, who would raise productivity and, in turn, generate a higher surplus, which could be diverted to Egypt’s nascent industries through taxation. The regime replaced the control and surplus extraction of the feudal landlords with centralized cooperatives that “*became the principal instrument for channeling resources out of agriculture toward industrial projects*”.⁵⁸¹ Although land productivity did not rise significantly a fraction of former feudal rents were now invested in industrial activities.⁵⁸² However, because large landowners were allowed to sell the lands that exceeded the 200 *faddan* limit, soon a new class of rich peasants came into being, which controlled the credit cooperatives and allocated State funds to their own economic activities. In addition, uneven taxation of crops led to reallocation of peasant resources to other crops.⁵⁸³ State capitalism began to dissolve feudal relations in the countryside, but it did not succeed in fully subjugating the agricultural sector to the interests of industrial

⁵⁷⁸ The ratio between realized surplus-value or profit-income which is reinvested and that which is consumed.

⁵⁷⁹ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming].

⁵⁸⁰ The concept of accumulation by dispossession was coined by David Harvey (2003), who developed Perelman’s (2000) extension of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation. For Marx, primitive accumulation was “...*nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.*” (Marx 1990: 874-75). Perelman argued that primitive accumulation was not only a historical phase in the formation of the capitalist mode of production, but a continuous process within developed capitalism. (Perelman 2000: 37) For Harvey, capital accumulation consisted of both the processes of expanded reproduction (“classical” capital accumulation) and accumulation by dispossession (continuous primitive accumulation). (Harvey 2003: 74)

⁵⁸¹ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 159.

⁵⁸² Mitchell 2002: 226.

⁵⁸³ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 159-60.

capital. Moreover, the unequal exchange between industry and agriculture, necessary to maintain the industrial rate of accumulation, undermined the attempts at increasing agricultural productivity.

Another strategy was augmenting the extraction of surplus-value in the industries itself: i.e. increased exploitation by extending the work day and/or reducing real wages. This, however, went against the core of the Nasserist national-popular Project.

Organic Crisis II

Nasser's progressive and qualitative Caesarism was an inherently unstable and transitional configuration. Firstly, there was a contradiction between the class nature of the regime and its State capitalist logic of accumulation. The State had to carry out a difficult balancing act between, on the one hand, securing political consent from its popular base through its "octroyal socialism", and, on the other, allocating sufficient resources for its project of modernization: the State's expansive "populist consumption policy" stood in contradiction to the "investment demands of developmentalism".⁵⁸⁴ The industrializing ambitions of the regime necessitated an economic rationale of labor discipline, high productivity, and low wages. This logic conflicted with the interests of its social base – peasants, workers, and modern urban professionals – that demanded workers' control (or at least real participation), reduction in working hours, and high wages. The socialistic rhetoric of the regime perversely exacerbated this contradiction, as it encouraged the popular masses to defend their social rights:⁵⁸⁵ While the First Five-Year Plan was a success, growth rates almost halved during the Second Five-Year Plan (1965-70).⁵⁸⁶ As the corporatist consensus put job security and full employment high on the agenda, industrial productivity was fettered by a high ratio of variable capital, rising fixed costs and under-capacity. From 1965 onwards, it became obvious that the system could not sustain both

⁵⁸⁴ Cooper 1979: 482-3.

⁵⁸⁵ Bayat 1993: 70-4. Also see Cox: *"Political cadres hesitate to pursue mobilization lest it get out of hand, and so they come to rely more on police methods to control development than extracting capital from the nation's human resources through organizing popular participation in the development effort."* (Cox 1987: 243)

⁵⁸⁶ Farah 1986: 98.

capital-intensive industrialization and high levels of consumption.⁵⁸⁷ The regime was reluctant to cut consumption after a brief and much contested experiment in 1965.⁵⁸⁸ Nasserist Caesarism then briefly turned to the “left” to counterbalance rightist layers of the state bureaucracy and their bourgeois allies who called for economic liberalization. However, the defeat of Egypt in the Six Day War in 1967 weakened Nasser’s position and halted the leftist turn: prices and taxes were increased; the workweek was increased from 42 to 48 hours without compensation; forced savings were deducted from monthly wages; paid holidays were cancelled; et cetera.⁵⁸⁹

Secondly, the partial and authoritarian statization of the economy generated a tendency towards private capital accumulation and a “self-privatization” of the public sector. Egypt’s economy was never fully nationalized, and pockets of private accumulation continued to exist in agriculture, trade and some industrial sectors. Although the rural elite had lost lands, it was able to continue its domination of the countryside through traditional networks and the new government cooperatives. Because domestic trade was left relatively free and prices of consumer goods were only influenced through subsidies, commercial capitalists flourished.⁵⁹⁰ The industrial bourgeoisie developed new activities to accumulate capital, especially as subcontractors for the government. Without the full liquidation of the private sector, the growth of the public sector stimulated a proportional expansion of the subcontracting companies.⁵⁹¹ State capitalism strengthened private capitalists within its protective womb,⁵⁹² who, ironically, favored more liberal economic policies.⁵⁹³

Thirdly, without any democratic supervision over the economy, the powerful State bureaucracy gained ever more the Subjectivity of an independent ruling class, treating the “public” sector as its own property.⁵⁹⁴ However, as a bureaucracy cannot reproduce itself legally as a private class it has to find

⁵⁸⁷ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 459.

⁵⁸⁸ Farah 1986: 98–9.

⁵⁸⁹ Posusney 1996: 219.

⁵⁹⁰ Cooper 1979: 499.

⁵⁹¹ Khafaji 2004: 247.

⁵⁹² Marfleet 2011.

⁵⁹³ Cox 1987: 243.

⁵⁹⁴ Farah 2009: 36; 76.

footholds outside the “public” sphere to safeguard its private interests.⁵⁹⁵ Nasserist State capitalism was transitional because in the long run it had “*an inherent tendency to divert resources to private hands... and therefore it paved the road for economic liberalization irrespective of the intentions of its political leaders.*”⁵⁹⁶ This tendency was reinforced by the appointment of former owners of private companies, such as construction mogul Osman Ahmed Osman, as managers of public companies.⁵⁹⁷ State capitalism stimulated the State bureaucracy to develop into some type of private capitalist class, and, conversely, existing private capitalists to (re)capture State power.⁵⁹⁸

Lastly, these endogenous contradictions were exacerbated by the war in Yemen (1963-67) and the disastrous Six Day War with Israel (1967).⁵⁹⁹ The Nasserist bloc barely survived the defeat, probably more due to the fragmentation of its discontents than the strength of the post-war consensus.⁶⁰⁰ The national-popular Project was in shambles, and the Nasserist bloc fell back on its core actors: the State apparatus; the bureaucratic and technocratic middle classes; and the army. To secure their support, the import policy was changed, granting these groups expanded access to luxury consumer goods. Moreover, the first denationalizations were carried through in mid-1968, and licenses for private production quadrupled between 1967 and 1969. Incentives were given to the rural bourgeoisie to increase agricultural production.⁶⁰¹

After the Six Day War the political optimism of the Nasserist epoch transformed into cynicism. The dream of “Arab socialism” was shattered and the State had lost its ethico-political dimension. The war and subsequent organic crisis forced the Nasserist bloc to change its accumulation strategy and the composition of its class alliances. Without the wholesale abolition of the private sector, the full liquidation of the old ruling classes, and the implementation of popular democracy,⁶⁰² Nasserist Caesarism was caught between the logic of accumulation and the interests of its class base.

⁵⁹⁵ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 207-9.

⁵⁹⁶ Khafaji 2004: 241.

⁵⁹⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

⁵⁹⁸ Hinnebusch 1981: 463.

⁵⁹⁹ Cooper 1979: 484.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid. 515.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid. 484-88; Johnson 1973:5.

⁶⁰² Bush 2007: 1603.

CHAPTER 9

Sadat's Passive Revolution

Egypt can claim to have pioneered neoliberalism in the Global South

Alex Callinicos (2011)

Passive Revolution

Political Reform

Even though a democratization of the State was out of the question for the ruling Caesarist clique, at the end of the 1960s there was a debate on the manner in which the economic crisis had to be solved. One faction proposed to reinforce the Nasserist historical bloc by a further radicalization of the “socialist” aspect of the regime; i.e. the full nationalization and statization of the economy. This strategy of accumulation was opposed by classes and social groups who wished to strengthen private actors through the liberalization of trade, the privatization of public companies, and the attraction of foreign investment:⁶⁰³ wealthy landlords; pre-Nasserist industrial capitalists who had become managers of public companies; bureaucratic State elites that had emerged during the Nasserist era; high-ranking army officers; and commercial capitalists who wanted to expand their activities.

When in 1970 Sadat became president, he supported the neoliberal strategy of accumulation and continued the process of economic liberalization and privatization that had already begun under Nasser. Unlike Nasser, however, Sadat leaned heavily on private capital groups in order to “solve” the problems that the Egyptian economy faced. The Nasserist political superstructure had become an obstacle for Sadat’s policies and during the “Corrective Revolution” of 1971-1972 the state apparatus was cleansed from the influence of Marxists and Nasserists such as Ali Sabry and Sharawy Gomaa. Because of the weakness of the “socialist” faction in the State apparatus and the economic-corporate state of the working class, the Right obtained a swift victory over the bureaucratic Nasserist Left, which was uncomfortable with mobilizing the masses.⁶⁰⁴ In 1976 the ASU

⁶⁰³ Beattie 2000: 12.

⁶⁰⁴ Aoude 1994; Farah 1986: 27.

was hacked up in a “left”, “center”, and “right” platform, which became independent parties: the National Progressive Unionist Party or Rally Party (*Tagammu*); the Egyptian Arab Socialist Party (EASP); and the *al-Ahrar* party. In 1977-78 Sadat created the National Democratic Party (NDP), which became, after its forced merger with EASP, the de facto ruling party of Egypt.⁶⁰⁵ The new course was presented as a democratic revolution: “supremacy of law, the state of institutions, the establishment of freedoms, and respect for the constitution”.⁶⁰⁶

Civil Caesarism

The “democratic revolution” constituted the legitimization of a reduction and reconfiguration of the position of the military in the historical bloc. Nasser had already attempted to decrease the power base of the military within the authoritarian national-popular bloc by strengthening the position of the Interior Ministry and expanding its tasks and responsibilities. However, through the influential and charismatic figure of Field Marshal Amer, the military was able to continue its domination of domestic security until the Six Day War of 1967. Nasser used Amer’s fall and the tainted prestige of the Armed Forces to reduce the army’s authority to purely military matters. From 1967 onwards, the balance of power shifted from the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Interior. To compensate for the military’s retreat to the barracks and to counterbalance its power, the President created *Al-Amn al-Markazi*, the (General Security and) Central Security Forces (CSF).⁶⁰⁷ The CSF became a “civil army” of some 300,000 conscripted troops. In addition, the civil *Amn al-Dawla*, the General Investigations Department, was charged with internal repression. Whereas the CSF was established as a direct and straightforward coercive State instrument to beat up and fragmentize mass protests and strikes, General Investigations engaged in the selective detainment and torture of activists and political leaders.⁶⁰⁸ Sadat expanded these civil apparatuses and developed them into the coercive tools of his new neoliberal Project.

⁶⁰⁵ Al-Ahram Weekly 1995b.

⁶⁰⁶ Tucker 1978:6.

⁶⁰⁷ Springborg 2009: 10.

⁶⁰⁸ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

After the Camp David negotiations of 1978, the Armed Forces not only lost their political, but also their military function within the new bloc. To appease the officers, Sadat granted them economic concessions, as Paul Amar explained:

...the military has been marginalized since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Israel and the United States. Since 1977, the military has not been allowed to fight anyone. Instead, the generals have been given huge aid payoffs by the USA. They have been granted concessions to run shopping malls in Egypt, develop gated cities in the desert and beach resorts on the coasts. And they are encouraged to sit around in cheap social clubs.⁶⁰⁹

From Caesarist overlords, the generals degenerated into petty capitalists, whose mediocre surpluses were artificially shielded from private and public competition. The multi-party system was but a democratic façade for Sadat's civil dictatorship.⁶¹⁰

Infitah

During Sadat's reign, military Caesarism turned into a civil dictatorship. Despite Sadat's attempts at establishing Islam and bourgeois democracy as new ideological forms, the integral State lost its ethico-political dimension. A cynical epoch of "passive revolution" began, in which the ruling elites aimed to radically transform the economic structure without consent of their erstwhile popular allies.⁶¹¹ The rule of the Caesarists was no longer determined by their leadership, but by their ability to maintain the economic-corporate fragmentation of subaltern Subjects.⁶¹² Sadat's new historical bloc was designed as an alliance between military generals, State bureaucrats, public sector managers, powerful landlords, subcontractors, new layers of private commercial and financial bourgeoisie, Islamic students, foreign capitalist investors, and the USA.

From the 1970s onwards, the passive revolution took on an offensive form. Large landowners were able to reclaim some of their sequestered lands and agricultural rents were raised for the first time since 1952.⁶¹³ Private companies were legally protected against nationalization, public-private enterprises were regulated as private instead of public companies, and a number of "free economic

⁶⁰⁹ Amar 2011a.

⁶¹⁰ Aoude 1994.

⁶¹¹ The concept of passive revolution has been discussed in detail in *Chapter 8 Nasserism*.

⁶¹² See Thomas 2009: 152.

⁶¹³ Bush 2007: 1603.

zones” were created that offered beneficial labor and tax conditions to foreign investors.⁶¹⁴ As the national bourgeoisie was too weak to force an Israeli retreat from the Sinai, Sadat had to court the United States in order to solve the important question of the occupied lands. A reorientation of foreign policy, away from the Soviet Union and towards the USA, was a crucial addition to Sadat’s domestic political realignment. The October War of 1973 improved Sadat’s nationalist credentials in the short term, and allowed him in the long term to negotiate a separate peace with Israel, switch sides in the bipolar world order, and become a loyal client state of the USA.

In 1974 the President announced the *Infitah* (Open Door Policy), a program of economic and political liberalization and reintegration in the capitalist world market, aimed at attracting foreign investment.⁶¹⁵ The *Infitah* was accompanied by huge loans from the Arab oil states and the USA, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded that the Egyptian state devalued the pound and cut subsidies on basic consumer goods.

The *Infitah* was the explicit declaration of a new strategy of accumulation that reoriented Egypt’s domestic economic structure towards neoliberal changes in the global economy.⁶¹⁶ Sadat pioneered the emerging worldwide passive revolution of neoliberalism in the Global South by his transformation of the Nasserist historical bloc.⁶¹⁷ However, the penetration (aptly named *Infitah*) and articulation of global neoliberalism in the Egyptian social formation failed to live up to its expectations. Despite a high economic growth of eight percent between 1975-82, foreign investment was little and almost solely directed towards the development of tourism and the new private financial sector. Privatization and liberalization of State companies, coupled with a high inflation, led to deindustrialization, jobless growth, an increase of unemployment and a decrease of real wages.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁴ Al-Shakry 2011a.

⁶¹⁵ Bayat 1993: 77-8; Farah 1986: 22-4; Lachine 1977: 4-5.

⁶¹⁶ See Cox 1987: 219-44.

⁶¹⁷ Callinicos 2011. The military coup of Pinochet in Chile in 1973 initiated a similar neoliberal reconfiguration. (Beinin 1999: 21)

⁶¹⁸ Farah 2009: 39-41.

Workers versus Infitah

Sadat's offensive passive revolution interpellated a development of subaltern Subjects, especially the workers' and students' movements. Due to the success of Nasserist hegemony, workers had remained relatively passive during the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s they started to move when their economic predicament worsened and the national-popular bloc collapsed. A first wave of labor protests took place in 1971 and in 1972, primarily directed against the slow erosion of wages. The restoration of wage levels in 1972 and the October War in 1973 temporarily halted the strike activities, which were resumed in the fall of 1974. Between 1975 and 1977 workers protested against the *Infitah*, which they perceived as an assault on the rights and concessions they had gained under Nasser.⁶¹⁹ The implementation of IMF austerity measures resulted in price hikes, which provoked the spontaneous "bread riots" of January 18-19 in Cairo in 1977. Industrial workers in Helwan struck and demonstrated in Tahrir Square.

As protesting workers did not receive any support from the existing trade union structures or political figures, they had to develop new grassroots networks and forms of organization – i.e. proletarian neoformations – to overcome their SSoD of economic-corporate fragmentation. Labor leader Barakat recalled that:

*In Abd al-Nasser's days we tried to complain to the government and we directed our complaints to him, Abd al-Nasser. We thought he was protecting us against capitalism and we discovered that this was wrong. In the Sadat era we were working against Sadat himself and capitalism directly and our freedom was like a disaster. By law we were prevented from participating in the unions, and we were cut off from the candidate lists in the elections And we were arrested and jailed.*⁶²⁰

In the public sector, workers had conserved their old leaders and collective memories of the struggles of the 1940s and 1950s, which meant that they did not have to build their movement entirely from scratch. Beinín argued that: "Their social relations of production, above average level of skill and education, concentration in industries perceived as vital to the national economy, and relatively privileged conditions gave them the greatest capacity to organize themselves outside formal trade union structures or transform local trade union committees into organs of struggle."⁶²¹ The

⁶¹⁹ Posusney 1996: 220-2.

⁶²⁰ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

⁶²¹ Beinín 1996: 259.

public worker strikes drew students, the unemployed and other urban subaltern groups into their activity-system of resistance.⁶²²

Even though there was an almost feverish political activity among workers and leftist activists during this decade, it was impossible for the working class to immediately develop itself from its shattered, economic-corporate position into a hegemonic force in such a short period.⁶²³ The political expression of the working class had been eradicated during the Nasserist era and had to be forged in the struggle itself. The spontaneous insurrection of January 1977 expressed the pressing predicament of the subaltern classes, but also their inability to forge a historical bloc of their own. Economic concessions by the State and the increasing migration to the Gulf countries restored real wages, and, combined with a precise repression of worker leaders, prevented major industrial action between 1977 and 1981.⁶²⁴

The Third Wave of Communism

The roots of the “third wave of communism” can be traced back to 1967, in the wake of the Six Day War. The military defeat of Egypt is often perceived as the harbinger of the downfall of Arab nationalism and its subsequent substitution by Islamist subjectivities and practices. The 1967 war indeed provoked an ideological crisis, but not the sudden rise of religiosity and Islamism. On the contrary, it led to a huge popular mass movement, which lasted until the general uprising in 1977.⁶²⁵ *“It was the best era for the Left,”*⁶²⁶ leftist activist Wael Tawfiq claimed.

Already from the second half of the 1960s discontent among workers and students was fomenting over the lack of democracy and failing development goals. In February 1968 workers in Helwan went on strike against the light sentences of the Egyptian officers who were considered responsible for the defeat in 1967. Workers from other workplaces and students from all of Cairo’s universities joined their protest.⁶²⁷ In November, students organized actions against education reform plans and in favor of an expansion of political freedoms,

⁶²² Beinin 2005a: 131.

⁶²³ Beinin 1996: 261.

⁶²⁴ Posusney 1996: 222.

⁶²⁵ Farah, 1986: 22-4.

⁶²⁶ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁶²⁷ Anderson 2011.

occupying Alexandria University. News of the Western student and workers revolts reached the movement and stimulated the formation of a leftist counter-culture: a semiotics that contained both global and local elements, combining the emancipative icon of Che Guevara with the authenticity of songs and poems by Ahmad Fuad Negm and al-Shaykh Imam.⁶²⁸ In 1969 mass meetings organized by leftists in Helwan gathered some 4,000 to 5,000 workers discussing political and economic issues.⁶²⁹

The Egyptian left at the beginning of the 1970s consisted of various tendencies, differing in ideology, social origin and/or generation. A first group were the radical elements in the Nasserist political establishment, especially among the mid-cadre of the ASU and the Organization of Socialist Youth, but also amid high-ranked officials and RCC members such as Khaled Mohieddin. A second layer was composed of the old guard of the Communist Party and the DMNL from the 1950s. Thirdly, a new generation of leftist students, intellectuals, trade unionists, and young workers became politically active, their loyalties divided between different shades of Marxism and leftist "Nasserism". Groups identifying with "Nasserism" defined themselves as anti-imperialist and defended the public sector and the social and economic reforms gained under Nasser.⁶³⁰

From 1968 to 1973 the student movement formed the nucleus of the leftist movement, reflecting the global wave of revolt. After the October War and the *Infitah* general living conditions deteriorated, and as universities struggled to function normally, political student activities collapsed.⁶³¹ Economic malaise and labor unrest shifted the center of gravity of the protests to the factories and workers' communities. In 1975 a series of clashes took place between workers and the police in urban areas and between evicted peasants and the security forces in the countryside. Students joined in the protests and marched on the People's Council, demanding democracy and the right to assembly, strike, demonstrate and organize political parties.⁶³² Social and economic issues were raised together with demands for political reform.

⁶²⁸ Al-Bendary: 2008; Anderson 2011.

⁶²⁹ Posusney 1996: 220.

⁶³⁰ Lachine 1977:4.

⁶³¹ Anderson 2011.

⁶³² Lachine 1977:4-5.

During the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s two parties encompassed the majority of leftist activists: *Tagammu* and the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP). From its inception, *Tagammu* had been a construct of the regime. Moving towards a controlled multi-party system in 1975, *Tagammu* was established as the left wing of the ASU and turned into a full party in 1976. Headed by the leftist Free Officer Khaled Mohieddin, the party was a heterogeneous leftist front, including “*Nasserists, Marxists, the enlightened religious trend*”⁶³³ *that is democratic and socialist, and Arab nationalists.*”⁶³⁴ Through, on the one hand, a broad ideological consensus, based on anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and the struggle for democratic rights, freedoms, and a socialist society free of exploitation, and, on the other, an organizational flexibility, the party was able, to a large extent, to contain its internal centrifugal forces. Although *Tagammu* had been pragmatic since its foundation, accepting the conditions set out by Sadat for its existence as a legal party,⁶³⁵ it tried to make the best out of a bad situation, often transgressing the political limits that the regime imposed.⁶³⁶ When *Tagammu* sided with the mass movement after the January riots of 1975, issuing declarations in favor of the right to strike and political freedoms, it was accused by Sadat of being a cover for illegal communists.⁶³⁷ Some 200 of its members were arrested.⁶³⁸

In the same year as the *Tagammu* “platform” was created, communists of various backgrounds closed ranks and founded the underground Egyptian Communist Party (ECP). The relation of the ECP with *Tagammu* was complex, both on an organizational and ideological level, and evolved strongly throughout the last three decennia. In the years after the ECP was established, its members

⁶³³ Mohieddin himself was, despite his Marxist leanings, a devout Muslim and hoped to enrich the *Tagammu* platform with a religious left. (Sid-Ahmed 2005)

⁶³⁴ Mohieddin in *Al-Ahram Weekly* 1995.

⁶³⁵ Sadat allowed Mohieddin to set up *Tagammu*, on the condition that the party would not call itself a workers’ party, would not support strikes, or hinder the regime in any other way.

⁶³⁶ Sami 2005.

⁶³⁷ There was, of course, some truth in this accusation. As the only legal left-wing opposition party, *Tagammu* quickly became a political arena for leftist organizations which deployed entryist strategies, such as the Egyptian Communist Party, the Labor Communist Party, the Revolutionary Tendency, the 12th of January Organization Movement, and the Revolutionary Egyptian Communist Party – parties with a small but active membership. (Tucker 1978:7)

⁶³⁸ Lachine 1977:5.

succeeded in acquiring influential positions within the *Tagammu* apparatus. The communist Salah Adly recalled that:

*In the seventies the ECP realized that the most powerful leftist party at that time was Tagammu. And of course there were a lot of communists then in Tagammu, Marxists, but they would not declare it, because the party law bans this kind of ideology, and we could not mention that some of the ECP's members were in Tagammu. But it was widely known. The relation in the seventies and eighties between the ECP and Tagammu was good. We played a main role in developing the direction of Tagammu.*⁶³⁹

The ECP was itself a heterogeneous organization with various tendencies expressing the unresolved discussions that dominated the Egyptian communist movement since the Second World War. Its membership consisted of the old cadres from the 1940s and 1950s and young militants, which had emerged from the post-1967 student movements.⁶⁴⁰

Islamist Resurgence

The Islamic Bourgeoisie

The Brotherhood of the 1970s differed fundamentally from its predecessor in the neocolonial era. Despite its anticommunism and sometime alliance with the Palace, the Society of the 1940s was a popular mass movement of approximately half a million members that advanced revolutionary national-democratic demands such as land reforms, State-led development, and nationalization of the Suez Canal. In the 1970s the Brotherhood had become an elite organization of a few hundred activists with ties to Saudi Arabia.⁶⁴¹ Sadat's passive revolution convinced many Muslim Brothers who had migrated to the Gulf countries to return to Egypt, bringing with them petrodollars and social-conservative values. The *Infitah* also benefitted *Ikhwan* merchants, petty-traders, artisans, rich peasants and landlords who had stayed in Egypt.⁶⁴² Brothers active in the liberalized financial and service sectors became a rising "Islamic" business class. They lent money to new private companies, encouraging patron-client relations between

⁶³⁹ Interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

⁶⁴⁰ Farag 1999.

⁶⁴¹ Naguib 2009: 162.

⁶⁴² Ates 2005: 137-9.

Islamic bankers, entrepreneurs, and State bureaucrats.⁶⁴³ These landed, commercial and financial capital groups constituted a new “Islamic bourgeoisie”. By the 1980s the rising private sector was controlled by eighteen families, of which eight percent had ties to the Brotherhood. About 40 percent of all private economic ventures were connected with *Ikhwan* interests.⁶⁴⁴

The Islamic bourgeoisie was sympathetic to an economic liberal, but social-conservative interpretation of al-Banna’s original project. Their ideology rejected Western moral and cultural values, but defended a free market capitalist economy, and contained elements of anti-Semitism, anti-communism, and anti-secularism.⁶⁴⁵ Omar Tilmisani became the new leader of the Society and published its views in the monthly *al-Da’wa* (the Call) paper. Because of its support for the *Infitah* and its enmity towards the Left, the new Brotherhood gained the tacit approval of the Sadat regime. Together with State bureaucrats, military officers, and *Infitah* nouveaux riches the Brotherhood became a vassal of Sadat’s new hegemonic project.

Al-Gama’at al-Islamiyyat

The Islamic bourgeoisie could not have become a social force without the mass support of Islamist students who came from rural areas and small towns.⁶⁴⁶ Independently of *al-Da’wa*, independent groups of Islamist students started to provide services to their peers – organizing summer camps, study circles, physical training, selling cheap study books, et cetera.⁶⁴⁷ Thanks to the support of the State⁶⁴⁸ – which saw in Islamism a counterweight against the Left – clientelism, violence, intimidation, an ethico-political vision, and the failure of the Left to offer an attractive alternative, the Islamist student movement grew quickly.⁶⁴⁹ At first they only mobilized around moral and religious issues, but the 1977 insurrection and the peace treaty with Israel politicized the movement.⁶⁵⁰ At

⁶⁴³ Beinin 2005a: 120-3.

⁶⁴⁴ Sami Said Imam in Naguib 2009: 163.

⁶⁴⁵ Naguib 2009: 162-3.

⁶⁴⁶ Farah 1986: 34-5.

⁶⁴⁷ Meijer 2009b: 192.

⁶⁴⁸ Already in 1971 Sadat saw the potential of the Islamist student associations and, together with Colonel Qaddafi, he erected the transnational youth organization *al-Jam’a al-Shari’yya* to combat leftist hegemony in the universities. (Tucker, 1978:6)

⁶⁴⁹ Beinin 2005a: 119.

⁶⁵⁰ Meijer 2009b: 195.

the end of the 1970s *al-Gama'at al-Islamiyyat* – Islamist student associations – had taken over the domination of the Left on university campuses.⁶⁵¹

However, *al-Gama'at al-Islamiyyat* were divided along sociological and ideological lines. Peasants from Upper Egypt, who migrated to the Gulf countries during the 1970s, often returned wealthy. They were able to buy land, establish markets, and set up charity organizations at the local level, gaining both economic benefits and social prestige. Their children became cadres in *al-Gama'at al-Islamiyyat*.⁶⁵² These layers were much more radical than the Lower Egypt student leaders, who had stronger ties to the reformist Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁵³ The repression of the 1977 insurrection and the Camp David negotiations increasingly alienated the radical Islamists from the Sadat State.⁶⁵⁴ Sadat distanced himself from his erstwhile Islamic discourse and claimed that the Islamist student associations were funded and supported from abroad.⁶⁵⁵

In 1978 many Lower Egypt student leaders declared their allegiance to the Brotherhood, while Upper Egypt Islamists established their own *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* – the Islamic Group. Between 1979 and 1980 the Islamic Group fused with the radical *al-Jihad* organization.⁶⁵⁶ The increasing confrontation between the State and the radical Islamist groups, on the one hand, and the powerful example of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 on the other, led key figures such as Abd al-Salam Farag to a Blanquist interpretation of political *jihād* – arguing that a small minority of righteous believers should overthrow and capture the State in a direct, paramilitary way.⁶⁵⁷

A pre-emptive detainment of 1,536 Islamic activists in 1981 forced the hand of *al-Gama'a* and *al-Jihad*, which plotted then to assassinate the President before their organizations were completely destroyed. At the yearly October War parade that commemorated the 1973 war against Israel, four of their military sympathizers opened fire on Sadat, killing him. One of them, Khaled al-Islambuli triumphantly claimed to have killed the Pharaoh.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵¹ Ibid. 191; Naguib 2009: 163-4.

⁶⁵² Beinun 2005a: 128

⁶⁵³ Meijer 2009b: 195-6.

⁶⁵⁴ Farah 1986: 126.

⁶⁵⁵ Zemni 2006: 93.

⁶⁵⁶ Meijer 2009b: 197.

⁶⁵⁷ Zemni 2006: 97-8.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid. 100.

The New Brotherhood

The merger of the largest and most successful Lower Egypt Islamic student association, led by Essam al-Erian and Abd al-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh, with the *al-Da'wa* group supplied the Brotherhood with fresh cadres and a new social base.⁶⁵⁹ The withdrawal of the State from public services opened up new possibilities for the Islamists to expand their influence among the urban poor and impoverished middle classes. Rich *Ikhwan* patrons established their own charity organizations. Through the patron-client relations of these foundations the Islamic bourgeoisie was able to mobilize layers of the lower-middle classes, the “lumpenintelligentsia”⁶⁶⁰ and the subproletariat. Due to their exclusion from Sadat’s emerging bloc, students and professionals from the South in particular were attracted to radical forms of Islamism. Once they had benefited from Nasser’s land reform and free education and now, when they migrated to the cities, they lacked employment and social networks.⁶⁶¹ Ironically, petrodollars and *Infitah*-money financed the private Islamic welfare policies that had become necessary due to Sadat’s privatization and liberalization politics of which the Brotherhood bourgeoisie was the main beneficiary.⁶⁶² As Joel Beinin observed: “...Islamism appeals to both the losers and the winners of global neo-liberal economic restructuring.”⁶⁶³ Islamism came to represent the ideology of both those who were included and excluded from Sadat’s new hegemonic bloc.

Politicized Islam became a powerful weapon in the arsenal of Sadat’s offensive passive revolution that sought to dismantle the Leftist opposition and redirect the entire social formation towards free market capitalism.⁶⁶⁴ The use of “Islam” as an ideological marker had many benefits. Firstly, it mobilized familiar and deep-rooted religious and cultural signs and practices that were immediately recognizable to the masses. Secondly, as a floating signifier, “Islam” was sufficiently vague to represent different and even contradictory class platforms. Thirdly, the deliberate confusion of political and religious uses of Islam

⁶⁵⁹ Naguib 2009: 164.

⁶⁶⁰ During the seventies the public sector failed to absorb the increasing number of graduates who were turned into a group of frustrated unemployed with a degree.

⁶⁶¹ Ates 2005: 137.

⁶⁶² Beinin 2005a: 115.

⁶⁶³ Ibid. 113.

⁶⁶⁴ Farah 1986: 25.

delegitimized the political criticisms of the secular Left as cultural attacks of an alienated and Westernized Other.⁶⁶⁵

Islamic Fascism?

The forces of resurgent Islamism, backed by the Sadat-regime, competed successfully with the Left over street politics. The defeat of leftist student movements in the universities left a lasting imprint on the activists of the “third wave”. When I asked Fakhry Labib, an elderly Marxist and senior leader of the African-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), in 2008 whether the Muslim Brothers constituted a danger or a potential ally to the left, he answered that:

They are very dangerous. They are enemy number one because they are fascists. This is not a problem of religion. They are the most rightist strata in capitalism. And in the countryside also, among peasants. So it is not a problem of religion at all, it is a problem of class interests. They are primarily an anti-revolutionary force. They are a problem. I feel that they are greater enemies than Mubarak. Not Mubarak as a man, but as a system, as a regime. They are more dangerous, because they will not grant you any reform. You see what they are doing in Sudan: destruction. Or in Iraq. Or what they have done in Palestine. They divided Palestine. Anywhere they divide and destroy. They are very dangerous. We want to go forward, some parts of the rightist strata want to keep the status quo, but others want to take you back. Back to where? To when?

...I think they became strong because the rulers have spoiled them. We live under very bad conditions and they make use of it. We supposed that the contrary would happen, that the Left would make use of these conditions for its benefit. To my sorrow, I feel that there are some of the left, some communists, who are making alliances with them. This is a very bad thing. And they are trying to tell us that the our situation is comparable to South America where you find the liberation theology of the priests and so on... But this is completely different. Completely different.⁶⁶⁶

The understanding of the Islamist phenomenon among many activists of the “third wave” is informed by the experience of the Egyptian religious right in the 1970s and the outcome of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The movements that were mobilized under the flag of a politicized Islam were seen as a reactionary

⁶⁶⁵ See Farah 1986: 28.

⁶⁶⁶ Interview with Fakhry Labib, Cairo, 17 February 2008.

force, bent on destroying the leftist student and worker movements whilst serving the interests of the ruling classes – much like the historical experience of European fascism in the Interbellum.

Nadia Farah pointed towards the similarities between Islamist and fascist ideologies: (1) a cult of the State or the community embedded within an organicist worldview; (2) nationalism; (3) respect for private property and capitalist economy and a resistance against international finance and monopoly capital; (4) corporatism. Following Nicos Poulantzas, she analyzed fascism and Islamism as the ideological articulations of a weak middle class that desires to emancipate itself through the State, balancing between the interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.⁶⁶⁷ However, she also acknowledged that the nature of a social movement is not determined by its abstract ideology, but strongly shaped by its particular activities.⁶⁶⁸

Rather than being a coherent ideology, Leon Trotsky defined fascism as a spontaneous *mass movement* with the downtrodden petty bourgeoisie at its core. When both bourgeois democracy and classic military dictatorships failed as stable State forms during the economic and political crises of the Interbellum, the ruling classes employed the fascist movement as a battering ram against the organized working class. The rule of fascism was first established in the streets through the destruction of workers' organizations. The conquest of political society followed the fascists' *de facto* domination of civil society. The fascist State then continued with the liquidation of the workers' movement and the atomization of the working class, which prevented the development and crystallization of new class organizations.⁶⁶⁹

At first sight, the Islamist movements of the 1970s had a lot in common with European fascism. As Gilbert Achcar and Samir Amin explained, Sadat and the *Infitah*-bourgeoisie wished to settle accounts with the Nasserist national-popular bloc and mobilized the spontaneous movement of the Islamist petty bourgeoisie – students, professionals, shopkeepers, et cetera – against the organized Left.⁶⁷⁰ Ismail Sabri Abd Allah remarked at the beginning of the 1980s: “*the social base of the Islamic movement is essentially a revolutionary base which was stolen from the*

⁶⁶⁷ Farah 1986: 47.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid. 45.

⁶⁶⁹ See Trotsky 1969.

⁶⁷⁰ See Naguib 2009: 156-7.

revolution. The social position and interest of the members of the Islamic movement should have made of it a progressive force."⁶⁷¹.

However, "Islamism" does not exist as a stable and homogeneous movement. As a developing Project, the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, has taken on many shapes since its inception in 1928 and did not remain unaffected by the transformations of the Egyptian social formation throughout the twentieth century. As Joel Beinin elucidated, politicized Islam expresses at times a grassroots protest movement, an instrument to suppress or mediate the class struggle, and a cultural framework for capital accumulation.⁶⁷² Various classes are able to express their interests with the floating signifier of Islam: *"Islam has always been present in the array of cultural elements available to define local identities. And in the modern era it has been mobilized for a wide range of contradictory political purposes."*⁶⁷³ Nazih Ayubi concurred that religious interpretations *"...may range anywhere from being on the one hand a tool of legitimation and preservation of the status quo, to being a vehicle for protest and a spearhead for revolution on the other"*⁶⁷⁴ Therefore, the similarity between European fascism in the Interbellum and Egyptian Islamism in the 1970s is rather the political integration of potentially progressive middle-class forces in the reactionary historical bloc of a passive revolution, than an ideological or sociological analogue between the "systems" of fascism and Islamism.

Despite, or because of, its fascistic potential, Sadat was wary of any powerful independent Islamist movement. Unlike European fascism, the government did not use the Islamic student associations as a battering ram against the working class, but fell back on its classic agents – the police and the army – to suppress strikes. Furthermore, at moments of profound class confrontations, such as the 1977 insurrection, the government found itself facing a spontaneous alliance of working and middle classes.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the Islamist movements of the 1970s played a reactionary role in aiding the state to suppress the first post-Nasserist popular mass movements of students and workers. The cadres of the "third wave" of communism personally experienced "Islamism as fascism". For many members

⁶⁷¹ Abd Allah (1982) in Farah 1986: 40.

⁶⁷² Beinin 2005a: 113.

⁶⁷³ Ibid. 116.

⁶⁷⁴ Ayubi 1991: 61.

of this generation, the politicization of Islam became entwined with a counter-revolutionary practice. Even though in the next three decades day-to-day politics sometimes required pragmatic alliances with the Muslim Brothers, the “third wave” cadres always remained suspicious of the ulterior motives of Islamic political agents, as they continued to cast the *Ikhwan* in the mould of 1970s Islamism.

Organic Crisis III

The uprising of 1977 was the zenith of the protest movement that had begun in 1968. Leftist students joined workers in their protests, which quickly spread through the whole country, from Aswan to Alexandria. Even though the movement started as a protest about “everyday” economic grievances:

...the demonstrators advanced beyond declaring disapproval of the specific economic policies that had prompted the demonstrations to challenge the legitimacy of the entire regime and its restructuring of Egyptian society as embodied in the open door policy. The slogans raised by the demonstrators began to articulate a vision of an alternative social order.⁶⁷⁵

Sadat’s regime was shocked by the uprising and quickly restored the subsidies on basic consumer goods in order to disperse the spontaneous protests. The government denied the spontaneous nature of the insurrection and blamed “secret communist organizations” for organizing the “riots”.⁶⁷⁶ Sadat mobilized the police, security forces, and the army on the streets to stem the pre-revolutionary tide. Once the masses were demobilized, the state implemented a zero tolerance policy for street politics. Leftist newspapers were shut down and socialist, communist, and Nasserist leaders – especially those active in the workers’ movement – were imprisoned.⁶⁷⁷ New laws restricted mass political action and gave life sentences for participation in demonstrations.⁶⁷⁸

On the other hand, the regime’s fear for a repetition of the “bread riots” slowed down the process of liberalization and privatization.⁶⁷⁹ Although the spontaneous opposition had not been able to present itself as a counter-hegemonic force and

⁶⁷⁵ Beinin 1996: 250.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid. 248.

⁶⁷⁷ Posusney 1996: 237.

⁶⁷⁸ Farag 2007.

⁶⁷⁹ Bayat 1993: 76-8; Beinin 2001: 157.

transform the neoliberal bloc, it succeeded in temporarily halting Sadat's passive revolution.⁶⁸⁰ Contingent changes in the economic structure – especially the influx of rents and migration of labor to the Gulf countries – created room for amendments in the neoliberal bloc. As I discuss further in the text, the accumulation strategy shifted from dispossession to rent accumulation.

One of the main reasons that the street politics of 1967-1977 failed to democratize the Nasserist and subsequent historical blocs was the inability of the Left to engage in a dialectical pedagogy with the workers' movement and establish a genuinely collaborative Project. At the beginning of Sadat's reign, many leftists believed that his coming to power signaled a leftist shift in Egyptian politics. Even after the President's "Corrective Revolution", communists still had illusions in Sadat's continuation of Nasser's national-popular bloc and only hesitantly supported (if at all) the workers' action in 1971 and 1972.⁶⁸¹ The October War of 1973 postponed any critical reflection of the Marxist intelligentsia on the changes in the Nasserist historical bloc until the declaration of *Infitah* in late 1974.⁶⁸² The Left was shocked by Sadat's "betrayal" of the Nasserist project and started to organize political opposition against the President. In the next few years, worker actions were supported, but: "*Once again, workers' struggles were represented by the Left as a component of the nationalist project, a front in the battle for economic self-determination.*"⁶⁸³ The Left's organizational weakness and political myopia left it unprepared for either the strike movements of 1975 and 1976 or the insurrection of 1977. Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq explained:

But the national question could not point the way to revolution and only in 1977 this was discovered. The leftists were surprised with the uprising in 18 and 19 January. The main activity was working among the students and there was little engagement with the workers' movement. There were no organizations which profited from this moment, because of the absence of a strong organization and the weakness of political consciousness blocked the workers from making a connection between their own social problems and the nature of the system. So they were not working against the system, they had reformist demands. Whenever the government accepted it, the protest was finished. The parties could not lead their supporters. The leftist organizations were also too closed. They had a huge number

⁶⁸⁰ Aoude 1994.

⁶⁸¹ Beinin 1996: 256-7.

⁶⁸² Ibid. 257.

⁶⁸³ Ibid. 258.

of members but they were not effective among the base of society. And the parties only discovered their weakness and little effectiveness during their actions. And it was easy for the system to find and destroy them after encouraging the Islamic groups in the universities. These were the two reasons of the failing of 1977.⁶⁸⁴

There was separation in activity and thought between workers and “their” leftist intellectuals. Leftists were primarily occupied with the “abstract” issues of imperialism, Zionism, and national development, while the consciousness of workers began with their everyday economic grievances and worries. The fact that most leftists courted the illusive national bourgeoisie as allies in their anti-imperialist struggle did not help their rapprochement to the workers.⁶⁸⁵ Socialism and self-determination were not recognized by leftists as part of the ZPD of the worker Subject. Leftists were locked up in their campuses, parties, and urban street protests, and did not focus on establishing a solidary system of activity with the spontaneous workers’ movement.⁶⁸⁶ In short, the lack of a collaborative Project between leftists and workers blocked the organic formation of a counter-hegemonic alliance, and of a genuine philosophy of praxis that offered solutions for the emancipation of both workers and “their” intellectuals.

⁶⁸⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁶⁸⁵ Tucker, 1978: 7.

⁶⁸⁶ Farah 1986: 25-7.

CHAPTER 10

Mubarak's Détente

If there had been a capable leadership, the history of Egypt post 1977 would have been very different.

Mahmud al-Werdani (in Farag 2007)

Defensive Passive Revolution

Economics

Sadat's new accumulation strategy did not fulfil its expectations. Between 1975 and 1985 Egypt's economy grew by an impressive average of eight percent per annum. However, this growth was not an expression of the development of the productive forces and actually led to deindustrialization, increasing unemployment – from 2.2 percent in 1960 to eleven percent in 1986 – and to a collapse of average real wages – from 70 USD in 1980 to eleven USD in 1991. High inflation rates – an average of 25 to 30 percent per annum – undermined real economic growth.⁶⁸⁷ Investments from the West remained low and the influx of new domestic and foreign capital was not directed towards Egypt's industries towards sectors such as finance, trade, services, and tourism.⁶⁸⁸ This reflected the rise of commercial and loan capital and landed property vis-à-vis State-controlled industrial capital in the new historical bloc. Egypt's industrial bourgeoisie remained weak because it had to compete on an unequal footing with an objective alliance between foreign capital and domestic landed and commercial capital. Commercial capitalists were not interested in revolutionizing production, but followed the principle of "buying cheap, selling dear" through trade and speculation, and by controlling local markets, real estate and petty production units. They were able to function as mediators between foreign capital and local selling places. Fractions of the *Infitah*-bourgeoisie that did not control trade networks suffered under monopoly prices of foreign multinationals and the domestic public sector. Together with commercial capitalists, large landowners engaged in speculative activities. These economic factions had no intention to invest in industrial sectors, as the combination of high rental income and real

⁶⁸⁷ Farah 2009: 39-41.

⁶⁸⁸ Farah 1986: 114.

estate property granted higher revenues. Most surplus value still existed in the form of rent, interest, speculation in politicized land markets or commercial income. In 1982 only twenty percent of total new capital was invested in manufacturing activities.⁶⁸⁹

Due to their monopoly position and because of their high amount of constant capital – which led to a more efficient production process and a lower value of produced commodities – foreign industries were more competitive than their Egyptian counterparts. In a free-trade neoliberal regime the amount of investment required to compete with foreign capital is considerable. Due to a lack of labor-saving techniques and technological investments, along with the undesirability of a higher rate of exploitation, Egypt's industries became even more dependent on foreign capital.⁶⁹⁰

Despite the failure of the ISI model, the end of State-led industrialization, and the collapse of the Nasserist consensus, the public sector continued to expand until the mid-1980s and the regime was able to sustain its redistributive policies.⁶⁹¹ State capitalism had given up its industrializing ambitions, but it was able to prolong its life-form through an accumulation of non-productive revenues or rents.⁶⁹² From the second half of the 1970s, a steady stream of revenues from migrant workers' remittances from the Gulf region, foreign loans and aid, tariffs of the Suez Canal, oil, and tourism, compensated the loss of income from the productive sectors. State-led rent accumulation constituted the economic backbone of a post-populist consensus. Rentier capitalism served the interests of both "public" bureaucrats and private capitalist actors: rents were accumulated and distributed centrally through the State, encouraging patron-client relations, while private capital entered the rent distribution process through subcontracting and the black market.⁶⁹³ Class fractions outside political society were able to buy

⁶⁸⁹ Khafaji 2004: 278.

⁶⁹⁰ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming].

⁶⁹¹ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 190.

⁶⁹² Richards and Waterbury defined economic rent as: "... the difference between the market price of a good or a factor of production and its opportunity cost (the price needed to produce the good or to keep the factor of production in its current use)." (Ibid. 15) Marx perceived capitalist rent – as opposed to feudal rent – rather as a social relation: "...reflective and derivative of historically specific property relations in the dominant mode of production..." (Yates 1996: 19). For a discussion on the concept of "rentier state" and "rentier economy", see Yates 1996.

⁶⁹³ Farah 1986: 115; Richards and Waterbury 2008: 17.

political positions, becoming a new bourgeois force within the State elite.⁶⁹⁴ In addition, a sizeable part of rents escaped State control and were absorbed by the Islamic banks and investment companies, fuelling the economic activities of the rising Islamic bourgeoisie.⁶⁹⁵

Yet, this “steady state” economy prepared its own crisis.⁶⁹⁶ In order to maintain the post-populist consensus, rents were not invested in industry or agriculture, but they were spent on imports and subsidies of consumer goods.⁶⁹⁷ In the Nasserist era there was a relative trade-off between industrial growth and equity because the State interfered in the redistribution of national income. After the “oil boom” in the mid-1970s the amount of profit rose without an accelerated rate of accumulation. A fall in rentier income from 1984 onwards forced the ruling classes to search for a new strategy for accumulation. The policies of economic dispossession and State violence of the 1990s and 2000s expressed the desire of the Mubarak clique to return to Sadat’s neoliberal accumulation strategy and to forcefully reconfigure the hegemonic bloc.

Politics

Labor conflicts, political unrest and the assassination of Sadat in 1981 revealed the societal instability that neoliberal reform induced. From its inception, Sadat’s neoliberal strategy for accumulation had been in crisis. The Nasserist national-popular bloc had never been successfully replaced by a neoliberal bloc. On the contrary, its unraveling had opened up spaces for contentious politics from workers, leftists, and Islamists. Sadat’s “offensive” passive revolution had been a failure. However, the emergence of the rentier economy had stabilized Sadat’s class alliances in a *post*-populist bloc. The passive revolution continued, but as a defensive process, in which the new “neoliberal” class fractions ruled without a neoliberal accumulation strategy.

The defensive turn of the passive revolution entailed a softening of the coercive dimension of the regime. Political prisoners were released, civil rights such as freedom of press and of association were restored – to a degree – and in 1984 parliamentary elections were held. Relations with the Arabic nations, which had

⁶⁹⁴ Brouwer 1995: 77.

⁶⁹⁵ Beinín 2005b: 121-23; Mitchell 2002: 278.

⁶⁹⁶ De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming].

⁶⁹⁷ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 223.

soured over the separate peace with Israel, were improved. The political “détente” was not a process of “democratization from above”, but a tactical retreat of the dictatorship, leaving limited spaces open in civil and political society for contentious politics that remained subordinated to regime interests. Egypt’s parliamentary democracy was but a façade behind which the authoritarianism of the regime was carefully hidden.⁶⁹⁸ Via the prolongation of Emergency Law, the State had its civil society in a tight grip: banning strikes, demonstrations, and critical newspapers; and introducing military courts to deal with recalcitrant political opposition.⁶⁹⁹ The rules of the new democratic game were set by the government and the NDP. Elections were manipulated and voters were systematically bought or intimidated, as the Egyptian novelist Alaa al-Aswany claimed:

Well I do not think we have elections. When you say elections you are using a term from political science and this has specific criteria which do not exist here. What we have is a miserable form of theater which is repeated over and over again for thirty years. The results of these so-called elections are in the desk of the generals and Interior Ministry.⁷⁰⁰

Mass demonstrations, street politics, and political strikes were out of the question. The Political Party Committee systematically blocked the legalization of important political trends such as the Muslim Brothers, and it monitored and supervised parties even after their recognition. However, as long as the legal and illegal, secular and Islamist oppositions played along, they were tolerated.⁷⁰¹

Workers in the Moral Economy

A combination of state repression, relative wage stability, migration of workers to the Gulf and distribution of economic and strategic rents had kept the industrial peace between 1978 and 1981. Mubarak’s détente encouraged new, small-scale labor protests in 1982 and 1983. The drop in oil prices from 1984 on forced the government to enter negotiations with the IMF. A section within the Egyptian ruling class called for a far-reaching process of liberalization and privatization to

⁶⁹⁸ Abdelrahman 2004.

⁶⁹⁹ Marfleet 2011.

⁷⁰⁰ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2010.

⁷⁰¹ Beinín 2005a: 131; Beinín 2009a: 25; Stacher 2004.

fight rising inflation and to restore the rate of profit. Due to the fall of real wages and the threat of neoliberal reform, workers increased their collective actions from 1984 on.⁷⁰² They were led by local, organic worker intellectuals and often supported by leftist activists. Joel Beinin noted that, just like in the 1970s: *“Once again, unionized workers in large-scale public sector enterprises, especially those located in major industrial centers, were most prominent in this upsurge of workers’ collective action.”*⁷⁰³ Since workers in the newly privatized companies were less organized, and because their situation was more precarious than those employed by the state, they were less inclined to participate in strikes.

The actions of the workers movement in this decade were primarily defensive and apolitical, aimed at achieving particular economic demands and restoring the strong bargaining position of the working class towards the regime.⁷⁰⁴ These struggles often ended in the violent repression of the movement and/or concessions from the regime. The GFETU was caught between its loyalty to the Mubarak regime and its role as guardian of the Nasserist social reforms.⁷⁰⁵ The obstinacy of the labor bureaucracy, combined with grassroots working class actions, slowed down the process of neoliberal transition.⁷⁰⁶

Marsha Posusney claimed that, despite the sometimes very militant labor actions, workers were embedded within a “moral economy”: *“...the nature of labor protest in Egypt suggests that workers did adopt the Nasserist ideology of the 1960s, stressing reciprocal rights and obligations. Workers see their responsibility lying in production, to contribute to the postcolonial modernization and development of their country.”*⁷⁰⁷ The post-populist SSoD relegated the meaning of collective worker actions to symbolic tools, which ritualistically renegotiated the position of particular groups of factory workers within the ensemble of corporatist social and political relations. The activity of labor protest had as its object the affirmation and reintegration of workers within the moral-economic system. The main objectification of protesting workers at this point was not the classic “work-stoppage”, but the “work-in”: workers stayed at the workplace after hours,

⁷⁰² Beinin 1996: 262; Posusney 1996: 222-3.

⁷⁰³ Beinin 1996: 263.

⁷⁰⁴ Beinin 2009a: 23-4.

⁷⁰⁵ Bayat 1993: 77-8.

⁷⁰⁶ Abdelrahman 2004: 107; Beinin 2001: 159.

⁷⁰⁷ Posusney 1996: 233. “Moral economy” is then the interiorization of Nasserist corporatism.

asserting their role as productive and loyal actors within the patronage activity-system.⁷⁰⁸ Posusney observed that: "...workers themselves have eschewed actual work stoppages, using them only as a last resort. The most common alternative to strikes is the in-plant sit-in, during which management is ejected or ignored but workers continue running the factory on their own."⁷⁰⁹

As long as the State was able to fulfill its obligations, these forms of proletarian mediation interiorized a subaltern Subjectivity rather than developing worker Subjectness. The Strike remained entangled in the economic-corporate moment, unable to transcend its spatio-temporal particularity and economic "parochialism". Because of direct, "vertical" State mediations – and violent repressions – of labor conflicts through the GFETU and the police, there was little solidarity between factories in the same sector, let alone between different sections of the working class.⁷¹⁰ There was important support, however, from the urban communities in which companies were historically embedded. At this juncture, such forms of solidarity ironically undermined the development of working class Subjectivities by drawing workers into a shared yet amorphous activity-system of communal subalternity.⁷¹¹

Crisis of the Left

Between 1976 and 1981, *Tagammu* had waged a fierce opposition against the Sadat State, building a membership of 125,000 to 160,000 members.⁷¹² Its policy was one of mobilization and engagement with the struggle of workers and students. Although *Tagammu* and the Egyptian left in general intervened in the 1977 insurrectionary movement, it was not able to organize, structure, and direct the masses against the power of the State. Some leftist leaders drew pessimistic conclusions about the potential of street politics to change the status quo. In 2009 I asked Rifaat al-Said, historian of the Egyptian Communist movement and chairman of *Tagammu*, if the mass democratic and worker protests of the 2000s constituted a force of societal change. The elderly man waved his hand in a disdainful gesture and answered:

⁷⁰⁸ al-Mahdi 2009.

⁷⁰⁹ Posusney 1996: 233.

⁷¹⁰ Alexander 2012.

⁷¹¹ See Beinín 2011a: 183. I discuss this further in the text.

⁷¹² Aoude 1994; Tucker 1978: 7.

*What happened in Mahalla al-Kubra... even if it accumulated a thousand times, it cannot change the regime. In 1977 we had an insurrection and moved thousands, millions of people, from Alexandria and Aswan. The regime didn't feel the emotions of the people. It is the same in Europe, when millions went on the streets to contest the war in Iraq. Did the British government accept this revolution? No. So what happened? We demonstrated and suddenly in the morning we found the army in the streets. So we stopped. The Egyptians used to respect the army, not to be afraid of the army, to respect it. Secondly, we didn't want the return of the army as an influential force in politics. So, in my imagination it needs a patient accumulation of protest and oppositional actions and protests and sit-ins, and then, perhaps, the regime can retreat. We have the experience. We have changed a lot in this regime. If you were here twenty years ago and if we said such questions and replies, we were both imprisoned and all the people here would be in prison. We have vaccinated the regime to accept what we are saying. And we have vaccinated the people to be more courageous. What has happened historically should change historically. If you imagined a revolution or something like that, it is too far-fetched, in my imagination. Poor people don't make revolutions, believe me. Poor people need to return in the afternoon with some pieces of bread to their family. They are too afraid. And if the poor didn't find a way out, they usually return to God. And that is the main influence of Islamism today.*⁷¹³

Al-Said entered *Tagammu* as a member of the illegal Communist Party at the beginning of the 1980s. Praised for his vision and erudition by some, and denounced because of his authoritarian rule and collaboration with the Mubarak State by others, al-Said is one of the most controversial personalities of the Egyptian opposition.⁷¹⁴ At the beginning of the 1980s, al-Said began to advocate a non-confrontational policy towards the Mubarak regime. The failed uprising had shown the impossibility of revolutionary street politics and, in order to survive State repression, *Tagammu* had to refrain from challenging the State directly, by striking a balance between criticism and accommodation. Under al-Said's and other Communist leaders' influence, *Tagammu* slowly turned away from its historical engagement with the mass movement, instead focusing on activities

⁷¹³ Interview with Rifaat al-Said, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

⁷¹⁴ The president's old-fashioned yet comfortable and spacious quarters contrasted sharply with the disorganized, cramped and primitive workplaces of the *al-Ahali* journalists in the same building. Our civilized and calm conversation was interrupted by a phone call for the president, who, after a minute, began to shout angrily at the caller in a disagreement on the nature of HAMAS and Hizbullah. From my conversations with other *Tagammu* activists I learned that al-Said's outburst was not a coincidence, but an integral aspect of his authoritarian mode of political argumentation.

within the boundaries of Egypt's restricted civil and political society. His disregard for self-determining politics "from below" would eventually lead him to denounce the January 25 mass mobilizations, which further marginalized his already much contested position in the party.⁷¹⁵

When I visited Mansura in the same year, I met with Hamdi Qenawi, a middle-aged *Tagammu* and *Kefaya* activist. Walid Ali and Muhammad Taher, both young members of *Tagammu* and journalists of the leftist *Al-Badil* journal, were present as well. Proudly Qenawi showed me the scarred location of a bullet that had penetrated his arm during the 1977 uprising and had not been removed since. He vehemently disagreed with al-Said's disengagement with grassroots politics: "*During the seventies, Tagammu was very strong because it sided with the workers against the government. When Sadat moved to the right and towards the USA, there were many protests and demonstrations,*" he recalled.⁷¹⁶ Repression by the Sadat-regime weakened the Left, but this was not the real cause of its crisis:

*Even in 1980 there were still demonstrations and actions by Tagammu, for example during the student movement of 1980. The real turning point was the new presidential regime in 1981 and the idea within the ranks of Tagammu that the situation would change... When in 1981 Mubarak replaced Sadat, he continued his policies, but disguised his intentions better in the beginning. At first he made a lot of promises; he promised to be fair and just, and he released 1400 activists whom Sadat imprisoned. Some people in Tagammu, like Rifaat al-Said, believed that the presidential administration of Mubarak differed from Sadat. He believed that Tagammu should give the regime a chance to change Sadat's system. This was the starting point of our current weakness. We cut the relation between the party and the people... From then on there were good relations between the party and the regime; which is logical as it needed a license from the regime to exist.*⁷¹⁷

From 1984 on *Tagammu* participated in parliamentary elections – which did not prove very productive, as this once mass party of the Left with strong ties to the industrial working class only got a few percent of the national vote. Government rigging was only one cause of the electoral defeat. *Tagammu* had acquired the right to compete in elections and to operate freely in the national political sphere in exchange for a moratorium on street politics. Without the ability to mobilize its

⁷¹⁵ Conversations with Ahmed Belal and Haisam Hassan, March 2011, Cairo.

⁷¹⁶ Interview with Hamdi Qenawi, Mansura, 17 April 2009.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

traditional mass base, the party was cut from its organic electorate. At the end of the 1980s, its membership dropped to 25,000 members.⁷¹⁸ *Tagammu* activists remained active within farmers' and workers' organizations, but there was an increasing gap between the real "politics from below", embedded in local everyday struggles and life-worlds, and the abstract "politics from above", articulated in the Cairo HQ and performed in the virtual spheres of parliament and media. The growing discrepancy between local practices and national discourses and the cordial relations of the party's leadership with the government, made workers suspicious towards *Tagammu*.⁷¹⁹ Ironically, whereas the absence of mass street politics convinced the leadership of the "Third Wave Left" that democratization had to come through negotiations with the regime, its reluctance to mobilize subaltern actors bereft them of any substantial bargaining tool vis-à-vis the State.⁷²⁰

Consolidation of the *Ikhwan*

Whereas the Left failed to appropriate Mubarak's détente for its own development – and was, consequently, domesticated by it – the Brotherhood made good use of the "pores" of Egypt's distorted civil and political society.⁷²¹ Firstly, the resurrected Society was able to gain a foothold in the professional syndicates. The Nasserist massification of education in the 1960s and the guaranteed employment of graduates in the public sector produced a mass of middle class professionals in the 1970s and 1980s. The expansion of university education transformed professional associations from elite clubs into mass organizations of white collar workers. Because of their recent massification and their lack of a militant tradition, these labor organizations were less controlled by political society than the industrial trade unions. The Brotherhood presence in the professional syndicates flowed organically from its influence over the graduates who came from the Islamist student associations. Islamist student leaders became doctors, engineers, lawyers, journalists – or not: between 1975 and 1985 university graduates tripled, yet the State budget for public sector employment was cut, creating a layer of unemployed and impoverished middle-class youth. This

⁷¹⁸ Aoude 1994.

⁷¹⁹ Beinun 2007; Al-Khashab 2007.

⁷²⁰ Howeidy 2006.

⁷²¹ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 374.

dissatisfied “lumpen intelligentsia” constituted the primary social base of the Islamists during the 1980s.⁷²² As the only organized oppositional force within the professional syndicates, the Brotherhood quickly dominated these associations. In 1984 the *Ikhwan* controlled seven of the 25 seats of the board of the Physician Syndicate: by 1990 twenty of the 25 seats were in the hands of their members.⁷²³ By the beginning of the 1990s they also gained majorities in the engineering, dentistry, pharmacology, agricultural and even bar and journalist syndicates, which had traditionally been strongholds of the Left.

Secondly, the decrease of State-led welfare and housing projects led to a growing number of urban poor in the *ashwaiyyat*: informal neighborhoods “...where buildings have no permits, where streets have no formal names, where men wear the traditional *galabia*, where women sit and socialize in front of their homes in the alleyways...”⁷²⁴ The social intervention of aid organizations connected to the Muslim Brotherhood transformed these subproletarian layers into the beneficiaries and clients of private Islamist charity.⁷²⁵

Thirdly, the Society was able to mobilize its local bases of grassroots support in the professional syndicates and *ashwaiyyat* to strengthen its position in the “national” field of political society. As the Brotherhood was still an illegal organization it could not openly put forward its candidates in elections. This problem was solved through electoral coalitions. In the parliamentary elections of 1984 the Brothers forged an alliance with the right-wing nationalist *Wafd* party, which was the only opposition front that put out a respectable score of 15.1 percent.⁷²⁶ The “Islamic Alliance” of 1987 saw the Brotherhood absorbing the socialist *Amal* (Labor) party and the liberal *al-Ahrar*, and successfully obtaining seventeen percent of the vote.⁷²⁷

Throughout their interventions in civil and political society the *Ikhwan* were careful not to step too hard on the State’s toes. The Brothers realized that they were tolerated rather than recognized as a political force by the government. Their interpellations in parliament were first and foremost political performances

⁷²² Beinin 2005a: 124

⁷²³ Naguib 2009: 165.

⁷²⁴ Bayat and Denis 2000: 197.

⁷²⁵ Naguib, 2009: 165-6. However, the Brotherhood’s presence in the *ashwaiyyat* was challenged by groups such as *al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya*. (Meijer 2009b: 199)

⁷²⁶ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 379.

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

oriented towards their own rank-and-file and potential sympathizers. Despite enjoying majorities in many of the professional syndicates, the Brothers always left the chair to a member of the NDP. In this manner the regime was able to maintain its dominance, while the *Ikhwan* could always shift the blame of unpopular decisions to the NDP.⁷²⁸ Behind the screens the Brotherhood and the government negotiated the margins of opposition. The presence of the *Ikhwan* in these associations and in parliament was used to increase its political bargaining power in the negotiated consensus between the government and the opposition.⁷²⁹ There was a symbiotic relation between the Mubarak State and the Brotherhood, which continued as long as the *Ikhwan* did not grow too powerful or outspoken. This reformist strategy of the Brotherhood and its preference for recruiting members of the educated middle-classes alienated radical students, unskilled workers, and slum dwellers, particularly those who migrated from poor Upper-Egypt to metropolitan Cairo. These groups were attracted to more radical and/or puritanical forms of Islamic activism.⁷³⁰

The absorption of the *Amal* party in 1987 may give the impression that the Brotherhood began to move to the left at the end of the 1980s. Adil Husayn, general-secretary of the *Amal* party and chief editor of *al-Sha'b* (the People) re-imagined a socialist discourse on social-Islamic lines, arguing for a corporatist society. Notwithstanding these corporatist voices, the election program of the *Ikhwan* in 1987 articulated a neoliberal economic view. It defended cuts in the public sector, an increase of productivity, and the private sector as the backbone of the economy. Apart from an Islamic touch – Islamic banking and *zakat* were seen as the primary tools for social justice and distribution of wealth – the social-economic recommendations of the Brotherhood paralleled those of the government. Criticisms of rampant corruption, bureaucratization, and inefficiency were not directed at the nature of Egypt's political economy, but at the stalled execution of neoliberal policies by the Mubarak clique.⁷³¹

⁷²⁸ Ibid. 380.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ Ibid. 379-80; Beinín 2005a: 129-32; Beinín 2009a: 22-3; Naguib 2009: 165-6; Springborg 1989: 235.

⁷³¹ Ates 2005: 138.

The Left and the Brotherhood

The trauma of 1977, the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the détente of the early Mubarak years, and the triumphant trajectory of Islamism frustrated and confused the Egyptian Left. Was the main enemy imperialism and Zionism, the Mubarak “regime”, or Islamic fascism? With what political forces should the enfeebled Left ally itself?

When Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi advocated a national front between all political forces, including the government, against externally sponsored Islamist groups, Husayn Abd al-Raziq, then chief editor of *al-Ahali*, answered him that any national front should be directed against the USA, Israel, and the parasitic government. Militant Islamism was only a secondary danger in comparison with imperialism and its domestic agents. Throughout the 1980s *Tagammu* and other opposition parties refused to side with the government against the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷³²

When during the 1987 elections the Muslim Brotherhood effectively took over the *Amal* party, and when Communist candidates openly featured on *Tagammu* lists, the government put pressure on *Tagammu* to get back in line. The discourse of *al-Ahali* became one of “relative moderation”, which is still the paper’s line today.⁷³³ Farida al-Na’ash acknowledged that “*It was a policy of less confrontation, yes,*”⁷³⁴ but she claimed that:

*It was not a change in al-Ahali itself, but in the whole atmosphere at that time: the collapse of the USSR, the retreat of the left all over the world, and the police state, the hegemony of the police state in Egypt, and the martial law, the emergency law all over since Mubarak came to power in 1981, so there are many factors that led to the change to the political view of al-Ahali.*⁷³⁵

In the same year Fouad Zakariyya argued that even if both the Islamists and the regime were enemies, the fight against the Islamists had absolute priority:

Once the governing body comes to speak in the name of the Shari’a, opposition turns to unbelief, any difference becomes an insolence in the face of God’s law or an apostasy that has to be punished applying the appropriate law. The conditions of political and social struggle will become much worse and much more difficult. I am

⁷³² Flores 1993: 37.

⁷³³ al-Ahram Weekly 2000a.

⁷³⁴ Interview with Farida Na’ash, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

*not exaggerating if I say that the idea of the struggle itself will then be thoroughly uprooted. Therefore the interest of the left, and with it all nationalist forces, in maintaining the proper conditions for a legitimate political struggle imposes on all the duty to close ranks and stand against a tendency threatening to eradicate the principle of struggle itself.*⁷³⁶

Zakariyya's position, published in *al-Ahali*, sparked off a debate in *Tagammu* on the nature and role of Islamism, which was a repetition of the discussions on the "nature" of Islamism since the 1970s. Of the eleven replies appearing in *al-Ahali*, only one argued in favor of a front with the government. Yunan Labib Rizq made the comparison between Islamism and fascism and called for a struggle against political Islam akin to the European fight against fascism in the Interbellum. Most saw the Muslim Brotherhood as a fraction of the big bourgeoisie, which should be fought, while others saw the radical wing of the *Ikhwan* as a potential ally against the government.⁷³⁷ At the end of the 1980s the intellectual debate on Islamism and the relation between secular leftists and anti-government Islamists had been thoroughly conducted. The three main different views that crystallized out of the discussion are – more or less – still those of today: Islamism as (1) a form of fascism (e.g. among *Tagammu's* rightwing); (2) representing a faction of the bourgeoisie (e.g. among ECP leaders); (3) a potential ally in the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle (e.g. the line of the Revolutionary Socialists).

Workers without a Prince

The experience of 1977 created a divide within the left between those leaders, intellectuals, and activists who advocated a disengagement with street politics in favor of participation in the regime-controlled political community on the one hand, and those who tried to maintain relations with grassroots movements on the other. The leftists who withdrew from mass politics and who collaborated to various degrees with the state were either demoralized by the 1977 defeat, frightened by the specter of "Islamic fascism", or genuinely believed in a gradual democratization process led by President Mubarak. Marie DuBoc described a tendency towards "social fatigue" among some leftist intellectuals, a form of

⁷³⁶ Zakariyya in Flores 1993: 37.

⁷³⁷ Flores 1993: 37-8.

alienation connected to “...the tension between actors’ longing for change and the permanence of the status quo.”⁷³⁸ Fadi Bardawil observed that:

*Those thinkers and journalists have moved from an idealization of the revolutionary potential of the masses in their youth to a diametrically opposite view in their old age, locating the inherent ‘problems’ plaguing the region in the culture of these same masses. What remained a constant in this interpretive and political inversion is the distance separating the militant then, intellectual now, from the masses adulated then and despised now.*⁷³⁹

Due to their colonial mode of assistance these leftist intellectuals had never developed a dialectical pedagogy with “their” subaltern Subjects, which they only recognized in abstract and mystifying terms. Their distance from the class struggle obstructed a conceptualization of the economic-corporate predicament of the working class, and led them to “objectivist” explanations of the workers “passivity”: variations on the European Left’s post-1960s “embourgeoisement” thesis.⁷⁴⁰

Among those leftists who remained engaged with street politics and the class struggle, a renewed interest in the workers as a potential political Subject emerged. Many leftists and trade unionists rejected the colonial mode of assistance that had plagued the communist movement since its inception. However, some of them exchanged their previous colonialist attitudes for a total liquidation of the role of the Left in the development of the worker Subject. This liquidationism suggested that “...the working class is capable of organization and action without the assistance of the Left intelligentsia and need not be bound by its agenda or its disabilities...”⁷⁴¹

⁷³⁸ DuBoc 2011: 62.

⁷³⁹ Bardawil 2011.

⁷⁴⁰ The idea that the economic gains by workers via collective bargaining and political reform within capitalism embed their consciousness in a “bourgeois” or “middle-class” lifestyle – thus constituting a material brake on the formation of class consciousness. (For a discussion see Krieglner 1977. Within Marxist theory Kautsky’s and Lenin’s concept of “labor aristocracy” fills a parallel niche) However, “consumerism” is, arguably, a Subjectivity that exists next to and in contradiction with class Subjectivity. Ironically, in Egypt, for example, it were often the most organized and affluent workers – e.g. the cigarette rollers in the colonial era; the public sector workers in the 1990s – who engaged in strikes. *Relative* deprivation or affluence does not appear to constitute an *absolute* hurdle or springboard for the development of class consciousness.

⁷⁴¹ Beinin 1996: 264.

This call for a withdrawal of leftist assistance went hand in hand with the gradual liquidation of the instructive role of communist and left-nationalist institutions. For example, *Tagammu* cartoonist Hassanein recalled that:

*Rose al-Yusuf was a school of caricaturists who were drawing for causes, not only for money, they were communists. Drawing was a cause in itself, not a way to make money. And then they made a school which learns to draw caricatures for money... Caricatures changed from being a cause in itself, a universal language, to draw just to make money and to distribute ideas which move the society backwards.*⁷⁴²

The collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of many institutions and practices that depended on its financial and cultural sponsorship. The feeble and distorted promise of a “proletarian Prince” – a hegemonic apparatus of and for the working class – which had emerged in the 1970s slowly fell apart in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s. How could a philosophy of praxis develop when there was no shared activity where a proletarian “good sense” could encounter critical theory? With nostalgia, Hassanein recalled that:

*It was a tradition in Tagammu to educate the workers, helping them to understand present issues, how to solve problems and stand for their rights, and how to write, draw, and so on. But the reality is that the party is empty now. There were workers in Tagammu in the past, but now there aren't as much workers, we are not in the factories as we were in the seventies or the eighties, we are away from them. I try to gather children and to teach them, but there is no money for this. So I get the colors and the pens from my own salary. Even when the children draw a gallery the party does not encourage me in this task.*⁷⁴³

However, in the second half of the 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, the seeds of a New Left were planted that would blossom during the civil-democratic and workers' protests of 2000s.

⁷⁴² Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

PART III

Against the Pharaoh

Introduction

Even though it could be argued that the period of the 1990s and 2000s already constitutes “history” and would fit under the previous section of *Development of the Egyptian Workers’ Movement*, I think it is important to draw a methodological line at this point. This part of the dissertation bridges “the past” and “the present” in multiple ways. Firstly, in general, political and economic transformations from the 1990s onwards have been perceived as the “direct causes” of the 25 January Revolution.⁷⁴⁴ Secondly, these two decades produced new organizations, ideological tendencies, and generations of activists, which are still playing an active role in the current political and economic protests. The 1990s and 2000s represent the “lived time” of these collaborative Projects. Thirdly, at this point, references to journalistic and personal fieldwork sources start to saturate the text. Whereas the previous chapters might advance but a new perspective on the existing academic literature, the next sections integrate new empirical material, which is rendered explicitly in the text via the voices of my interview respondents.⁷⁴⁵

In *Neoliberalism*, I give an outline of the main economic and political transformations of the 1990s and 2000s, arguing that these reforms represented a return of the passive revolution to its “offensive” moment – “...a frontal attack on the working class and urban poor and on the poorer sectors of the peasantry...”⁷⁴⁶ Much has been written already on the topic of neoliberal reform in Egypt: I aim to keep this chapter brief and to the point. However, the following chapter – *The Civil-Democratic Movement* – is much more exhaustive, as it treats the development of the Egyptian Left and the resurgence of street politics in detail. The narrative ends with the disintegration of *Kefaya* in 2006. In *Islamism in the Neoliberal Age*, I sketch the transformations within the field of politicized Islam, before I move to a discussion of the complex relations between leftists and Islamists.

⁷⁴⁴ I treat the causes of the 25 January Revolution in the chapter *Reason in/to Revolt*.

⁷⁴⁵ Beneath the voices that I mobilize to scaffold the unfolding narrative, there is an unspoken undercurrent of informal fieldwork discussions and observations, which guided my arguments and conclusions. Although they sometimes come to the surface of the text, these streams remain mostly hidden – elaborating them would require a more profound ethnographic effort, which is not the goal of this dissertation.

⁷⁴⁶ Naguib 2011.

CHAPTER 11

Neoliberalism

When you've stood for two hours at the bus stop or taken three different buses and had to go through hell every day just to get home, when your house has collapsed and the government has left you sitting with your children in a tent on the street, when the police officer has insulted you and beaten you just because you're on a minibus at night, when you've spent the whole day going around the shops looking for work and there isn't any, when you're a fine sturdy young man with an education and all you have in your pockets is a pound, or sometimes nothing at all, then you'll know why we hate Egypt.

"Busayna" in Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2006: 138)

Accumulation by Dispossession

Rentier Crisis

The rentier economy of the 1975-1985 had supplied the State with enough financial leeway to appease the popular classes that were excluded from the post-populist bloc. However, from the second half of the 1980s on, rental income decreased and the "steady state" economy showed signs of exhaustion. The global fall of oil prices diminished the influx of petrodollars from the Gulf region, and a high inflation depressed real wages. National debt rose to more than 38 billion USD in foreign obligation and the budgetary deficit increased to over twenty percent.⁷⁴⁷ The dry spell in rent income, combined with the reluctance of the State and private capital groups to invest in the productivity of agriculture and industry, necessitated a new strategy of accumulation that would drive up the rate of exploitation. Already in the 1980s the regime prudently started to push for neoliberal reform, but worker actions and the resistance of the corporatist labor bureaucracy postponed harsh measures until the beginning of the 1990s.⁷⁴⁸

The Gulf War of 1991 led to the return of many migrant workers to Egypt, who flooded the domestic labor market. It also resulted in the collapse of tourism, compounding the State's fiscal crisis, which was induced by the regime's inability to pay back its military debts.⁷⁴⁹ Lastly, for the USA, the collapse of Stalinism

⁷⁴⁷ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 225.

⁷⁴⁸ Beinín 2001: 159.

⁷⁴⁹ Mitchell 2002: 276.

decreased the value of Egypt's "geopolitical rent": i.e. the price for its alliance with the Western bloc. The crisis of rent-based accumulation forced the Mubarak clique to turn to the IMF and World Bank to save the economy from bankruptcy.⁷⁵⁰ In 1991 Egypt accepted an Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP) inspired by the neoliberal paradigm of the Washington consensus.⁷⁵¹ The ERSAP aimed to contain and decrease foreign debt and inflation, by cutting state subsidies on consumer goods, privatizing public companies, liberalizing markets and prices, freezing wages, commercializing agricultural lands and implementing a flat tax.

Rural Reforms

The liberalization of agricultural prices and markets already began in 1987.⁷⁵² Desiring to transform the failing rentier accumulation strategy, the Egyptian government promoted "...a US farm-type model of extensive capital-intensive agriculture driven by market liberalisation, export-led growth and tenure reform."⁷⁵³ The underlying rationale of liberalization was that rising prices of agricultural produce would attract capital to invest in rural production.⁷⁵⁴ The State regarded landowners as willing allies in the realization of the free trade policies of the IMF, which promoted cash crop production. Similar to the colonial era, the economic interests of large-scale landholders were tied to those of foreign capital groups.

As a declaration of war against land tenants, Mubarak's Law 96 of 1992 abrogated Nasser's Agrarian Reform Law of 1952, granting former landowners the right to reclaim the lands that their families had lost during the redistribution policies of the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, the prices of land rents were to be governed fully by market forces instead of determined by law.⁷⁵⁵ After a five year transition period, the New Tenancy Law came into effect in 1997: from then on, land rents were governed by market prices instead of the former fixed rent

⁷⁵⁰ Farah 2009: 41.

⁷⁵¹ Bush 2007: 1599.

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ Ibid. 1604.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁵ Bush 2000: 238. In Nasserist and post-Nasserist Egypt tenants had to pay an amount of legally fixed capitalist rent. Law 96 removed the ceiling on the amount of rent. Increasing land rents was a necessary step to maintain the rate of profit for landowners, as the concentration of land had caused a fall in productivity. (Dyer 1997)

system. Rents increased by as much as 400 percent.⁷⁵⁶ In addition, landowners started to drive tenants from their land.⁷⁵⁷ A majority of lands became fully owned by the landed elite and embedded in a modern capitalist system of cash paid tenancies, allowing the landlords to accumulate capital at an accelerated speed.⁷⁵⁸ The livelihoods of some five million Egyptians were endangered by the New Tenancy Law as neoliberal reform in the countryside brought about a rise in land rents, the concentration of landholdings and rural violence as landowners sent police troops and thugs to chase farmers from their lands.⁷⁵⁹

Industrial Reforms

In the industrial sector, State companies were deliberately put at a disadvantage vis-à-vis private enterprises in order to force their bankruptcy and subsequent privatization. A new “Ministry of Investments” was established, which became the primary executor of the privatization process. Selling shares of State-owned enterprises on the Cairo stock market created an economic mini-boom in 1996-97. The State earned 1.5 billion USD from these privatizations. Between 1993 and 1999 over 100 factories passed into private hands.⁷⁶⁰ By 2002 half of the public enterprises were privatized or liquidated.⁷⁶¹ After 2004, a new cabinet headed by Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif stepped up the privatization and liberalization process. Corporate taxes were halved in 2005, from 40 to twenty percent of earnings, whereas personal taxes were raised, especially those on housing.⁷⁶² Private firms enjoyed the flat tax of twenty percent while the public sector had to

⁷⁵⁶ Bush 2007: 1606.

⁷⁵⁷ Beinin 2001: 164.

⁷⁵⁸ Bush 2009: 88–90.

⁷⁵⁹ Neoliberal reform only partially transformed social relations in the countryside. Small land owners and tenants survived due to the low wages of land laborers and the exploitation of the labor forces within the household. They act both as commodity producers for the market, in order to meet their rental obligations in monetary form, and as petty producers for the exchange of “subsistence commodities” with other farmers. (See Bush 2007: 1605) Capital did not fully penetrate and subsume the rural mode of production, which remained primarily oriented towards “easy” rent accumulation. Ironically, the introduction of market-oriented production and price formation in the countryside reinforced the dominating rentier logic, strengthening low productivity and increasing the prices of agricultural goods. (See De Smet and Versieren [forthcoming])

⁷⁶⁰ Beinin 2005b.

⁷⁶¹ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 251.

⁷⁶² Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

pay double.⁷⁶³ These aggressive policies resulted in an economic growth of five to seven percent.⁷⁶⁴

Economic growth, however, did not reflect a development of “expanded reproduction”, but a rapid accumulation by dispossession. State factories such as the Qalyub Spinning Factory were sold far beneath their actual value.⁷⁶⁵ It had been a myth that public sector companies were unprofitable: “In 1989/90, on the eve of the reforms, 260 out of 314 non-financial state-owned enterprises were profitable and only 54 were making losses.”⁷⁶⁶ Selling these valuable productive assets, however, resulted in quick and easy (yet unsustainable) profits, both for private actors and the State. Real wages in the public industrial sector dropped by eight percent between 1990 and 1996.⁷⁶⁷ Moreover, capital was directed to the construction of real estate, the production of luxury goods, and grand schemes such as the *Toshka* irrigation project, rather than invested in export-oriented industrial production.⁷⁶⁸

Neoliberal Accumulation

The slow collapse of accumulation-driven State capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of a rentier economy had blurred State, semi-State, and private capitalist sectors. State elites became investors in large private sector enterprises or used State power to favor their friends and families in the subcontracting sector, realizing huge profits.⁷⁶⁹ Egypt’s military-industrial complex developed a large civilian sector, engaging in construction, transport, telecom, food production, and capital-intensive desert reclamation, and building patron-client networks between private, joint-venture and military firms.⁷⁷⁰ The corporatist trade unions developed their own economic enterprises, managing pension funds, business investments, housing, and banks.⁷⁷¹

The government “solved” the financial crisis of 1990-91 with a massive capital injection in the banking sector of 5.5 percent of GDP and an additional fiscal

⁷⁶³ Farah 2009: 49-50.

⁷⁶⁴ Beinin 2009a: 30; Mitchell 1999: 455.

⁷⁶⁵ Beinin 2009a: 30; Farah 2009: 49-50.

⁷⁶⁶ Mitchell 1999: 458.

⁷⁶⁷ Mitchell 2002: 280; 286.

⁷⁶⁸ Mitchell 1999: 457.

⁷⁶⁹ Mitchell 2002: 280-81.

⁷⁷⁰ Bianchi 1989: 5.

⁷⁷¹ Richards and Waterbury 2008: 334.

exemption worth ten percent of GDP.⁷⁷² Public holding companies remained the largest shareholders in many of the privatized enterprises. Some privatized firms were sold to public banks. State holding companies set up private corporations or joint ventures. In 1998 the State bought back shares in most of its privatized enterprises.⁷⁷³

The outcome of the policies of privatization and liberalization was not a liberal utopia with an ensemble of competitive and productive private entrepreneurs, but a system of monopoly capitalism.⁷⁷⁴ The strategy of accumulation by dispossession created a layer of “crony” or “thieving” capitalists who increasingly dominated and directed the neoliberal bloc.⁷⁷⁵ Neoliberal reform in Egypt did not at all entail a “retreat” of the State from the “economic field”, but a redirection of State power and resources towards an increased accretion of rents via an aggressive policy of dispossession, which only benefitted a small clique within the ruling classes.⁷⁷⁶ Sameh Naguib remarked that: “...*the policies of neoliberalism were never about dismantling or even reducing the role of the state in the economy, but rather about increasing the role of the state as a facilitator of capitalist profit-making at the expense of the working class.*”⁷⁷⁷ The neoliberal transformation of the Egyptian social formation was a process of “State capitalism in reverse”: the State lost its function and position as “universal capitalist”⁷⁷⁸ and became the obedient tool of a particular and select group of oligarchs who were closely connected to foreign financial and select domestic capital groups.

⁷⁷² Mitchell 2002: 279.

⁷⁷³ Mitchell 2002: 281–82.

⁷⁷⁴ “... *the close ties between the regime and segments of Egyptian big business were hardly weakened by privatization. In many respects, the process resembles the nomenklatura privatizations of the former Soviet Union – insiders strongly connected to the state apparatus gathered most of the benefits.*” (Richards and Waterbury 2008: 251)

⁷⁷⁵ “...*the real problem with the regime was not necessarily that high-ranking members of the government were thieves in an ordinary sense. They did not necessarily steal directly from the treasury. Rather they were enriched through a conflation of politics and business under the guise of privatization. This was less a violation of the system than business as usual. Mubarak’s Egypt, in a nutshell, was a quintessential neoliberal state.*” (Ambrust 2011a)

⁷⁷⁶ Mitchell 1999: 461-2; Marfleet 2011.

⁷⁷⁷ Naguib 2011.

⁷⁷⁸ An evolution from protecting the interests of capitalism **in general** – e.g. by handling the workers’ movement; by creating legal frameworks that favor and safeguard capital accumulation (for example via private property laws); by guaranteeing security and stability in civil society; et cetera – to the defense of the **particular** interests of a **specific** group of capitalists.

Offensive Passive Revolution

The advent of neoliberalism turned the passive revolution back to its offensive moment. The neoliberal strategy of capital accumulation by dispossession initiated a new era of intensified class confrontation and increased authoritarianism.⁷⁷⁹ The ERSAP strengthened capital and rent accumulation at the expense of the livelihoods of workers and farmers.⁷⁸⁰ Standing squarely behind private capitalists and landlords, the Mubarak clique finally pulled the plug out of the post-populist consensus. The State forfeited its obligations in the moral economy, thereby undermining the patron-client relations between the subaltern classes and the ruling classes. As a true cynic, the State revealed the shallowness of its democratic and corporatist commitments of the 1980s by the increased use of coercion against its class opponents: opposition parties, Islamist movements, workers, peasants, slum-dwellers, et cetera.⁷⁸¹

In the countryside, the fragmented forms of resistance against the neoliberal land reforms organized by landless or small landholding farmers were violently repressed.⁷⁸² In villages such as Edku and Abu Hammad in the Delta, spontaneous riots broke out against State violence.⁷⁸³ By the mid-1990s, half of the rural population lived in poverty, an increase of ten percent in comparison to 1990.⁷⁸⁴ By 2007 the passive revolution in the countryside had resulted in “...119 deaths, 846 injuries and 1409 arrests...”⁷⁸⁵

At the dawn of the 21st century, Egypt’s manufacturing sector employed 12.9 percent of the labor force, producing 16.2 of the country’s GDP.⁷⁸⁶ The commodified or “market labor force” increased from 17.2 million in 1998 to 22.3 million in 2006 – an expansion that exceeded the demographic growth of the workforce.⁷⁸⁷ With regard to Egypt’s industries, privatization often led to mass firing of workers, with the aim of increasing productivity. As in the countryside, neoliberal reform in the industries did not stimulate investments. The process of

⁷⁷⁹ Al-Mahdi 2011b: 395.

⁷⁸⁰ Farah 2009: 41.

⁷⁸¹ Maher 2011.

⁷⁸² Bush 2000: 239.

⁷⁸³ Abdalla 1993.

⁷⁸⁴ Mitchell 1999: 463.

⁷⁸⁵ Bush 2007: 1606.

⁷⁸⁶ Solidarity Center 2011.

⁷⁸⁷ Assaad 2009: 10.

dispossession did not enhance the rate of capital accumulation, but increased surplus extraction in the form of rents.⁷⁸⁸ Cutting back on subsidies and wages decreased the purchasing power of the workforce, and the destruction of employment in the public sector was not compensated by new jobs in the private sector. In general, unemployment between 1998 and 2006 did not increase, as people either engaged in subsistence production, or joined the informal sector. Between 1998 and 2006 the share of the workforce employed in the informal economy increased from 57 to 60 percent.⁷⁸⁹ Moreover, in 1998 it was estimated that 70 percent of the workers in the private sector lived in poverty.⁷⁹⁰

The new accumulation strategy required a political reconfiguration of the post-populist bloc; i.e. the exclusion of subaltern forces and the subduing of fractions of the capitalist class. The ruling neoliberal class presented its political project as an anti-Islamist alliance in order to: firstly, incorporate Western governments and enfeebled domestic nationalist, liberal, and leftist intellectuals in its hegemony; and secondly, restrict the capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists to develop a counter-bloc. In political society, State control over elections and parliament was increased. The electoral law was changed to the disadvantage of the *Ikhwan*, which, together with other opposition parties, boycotted the 1990 parliamentary elections. The State tightened its grip over civil society as well. When the Brotherhood obtained majorities in the doctors', journalists', and bar associations, the government put all professional syndicates under direct state control.⁷⁹¹ Attacks and assassinations by terrorist organizations such as the Islamic Group and the Islamist uprising in Middle-Egypt gave the government an excuse to repress the Brotherhood. From 1995 onwards, *Ikhwan* activists, student leaders, and members of parliament were systematically arrested, intimidated, detained, and tortured. In addition, critical journalists and human rights activists were increasingly brought before court and trialed. In 1999 government passed a law that decreed that all NGO-type organizations had to reapply for a license to operate legally in Egypt. NGOs that engaged in political activities were banned.⁷⁹²

⁷⁸⁸ Mitchell 2006.

⁷⁸⁹ Assaad 2009: 2.

⁷⁹⁰ Farah 2009: 44.

⁷⁹¹ Abdalla 1993; Kandil 2008.

⁷⁹² Mitchell 1999: 465.

The neoliberal passive revolution of the 1990s and 2000s not only entailed an accumulation of dispossession in the economic sphere, but also a coercive dispossession of social and political rights in civil and political society. However, the lack of an ethico-political dimension to the politics of the neoliberal clique, and its reliance on direct domination rather than hegemony, provoked a growing resistance from subaltern Subjects.

CHAPTER 12

The Civil-Democratic Movement

And this is the first time we went to the street to call for a political demand that had an impact on Egypt itself. The last few years we went to the streets, many times, but to support Palestine, to support the Iraqi people, against Zionism, against imperialism, but no one went to the street to defend the interests of the people of Egypt.

Ahmed Shabeen, Kefaya coordinator, Interview, Cairo, 13 March 2008

Demise of the Third Wave

In 1990 *Tagammu* participated in parliamentary elections that were boycotted by all other opposition parties. Khaled Mohieddin, chairman of the party defended their tactic: “...in order to make our voice heard, we had to use a new method of opposition. We did not explode issues, but we took positions on issues.”⁷⁹³ In reality, the “legal Left” was offered positions in parliament in exchange for a moderate political discourse and a hard stance against the Brotherhood.⁷⁹⁴ The fall of the Soviet Union and the concomitant discredit of socialist thought in general encouraged the *Tagammu* leadership to translate their tactical “secular-democratic” turn into a new ideological framework. Communist leader Salah Adly explained that:

At the end of the eighties a number of Marxists claimed that the direction of Tagammu, which opposed the government and took the side of the poor people and workers, led to a loss of support from the middle class and the industrial productive capitalists. They claimed that Tagammu had to diminish its class policies and to represent a more moderate policy, and to diminish its opposition towards the regime, so that it can use the media in a better way. But the results were devastating for Tagammu. Tagammu lost members in the parliament, members, and support in civil society.⁷⁹⁵

For the elections of 1995 the traditional *Tagammu* slogan of “Freedom, Socialism and Unity” was replaced by “Justice, Progress and Democracy”. The 1998 party congress stated that socialism was no longer on the agenda, and that Egypt

⁷⁹³ Mohieddin in al-Ahram Weekly 1995a.

⁷⁹⁴ See al-Ahram Weekly 2000a.

⁷⁹⁵ Interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

should strive towards “democracy” and “independent development”.⁷⁹⁶ How “independent development” differed from “normal” capitalist accumulation was not clear, as the party no longer resisted privatizations in principle.⁷⁹⁷ Rifaat al-Said cynically asked how one could defend socialism in an age of liberalization:⁷⁹⁸

Of course, we have changed – there is no party that can remain the same. For example, our first platform spoke of the consolidation and support of the public sector, then reality changed and we had to adapt, so we changed that to “protection of the public sector”. Then we called for the “defence” of the public sector and now that the public sector has been practically sold, we call for “the preservation of organizations and institutions of national importance.”⁷⁹⁹

Adly contemplated that:

At the beginning of the nineties there were some changes in the direction of Tagammu, they went to the right and became a moderate leftist party. Its political positions are very good on paper, but in practice it does not cross any of the red lines which the regime draws for it. It does not mobilize, either in the streets, or among workers or farmers or against the regime itself.⁸⁰⁰

The disengagement of *Tagammu* from class politics was the outcome of a process started in the 1980s, as I have discussed above. State repression and the demobilization of the masses after the uprising of 1977 made *Tagammu* leaders look for shortcuts towards successful leftist politics. The détente during the first years of the Mubarak-regime created illusions in the potential and autonomy of democratic politics on the national level. In order to operate within the boundaries of the restricted political community, the “legal Left” cut its relations with its traditional social base of workers, peasants, and students – thereby further weakening its position vis-à-vis the regime.

The rise of the Islamist movements and a reluctance to “go back to the streets”, drove the leaders of *Tagammu* and the ECP even more in the arms of the regime. After the repression of the 1977 insurrection the prospect of mass mobilization was greeted with cynicism from party leaders. In the 1990s and 2000s, with Islamism on the rise, it was anticipated with dread: Rifaat al-Said claimed that the

⁷⁹⁶ Al-Ahram Weekly 2000a.

⁷⁹⁷ Al-Ahram Weekly 1995a.

⁷⁹⁸ Sami 2005.

⁷⁹⁹ Al-Said in al-Ahram 2000b.

⁸⁰⁰ Interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

Brotherhood was the only organization capable of “controlling” a mass movement.⁸⁰¹ In 1999, for the first time, *Tagammu* MPs did not vote against another term for President Mubarak.⁸⁰²

Tagammu's collaboration with the regime and its disengagement from grassroots politics alienated members and sympathizers. In 2003 an internal report admitted that the party had lost its traditional influence in the universities, professionals syndicates, and trade unions.⁸⁰³ When in 2009 I spoke with Husayn Abd al-Razek, a leader of the old guard in *Tagammu*, he admitted that: “...for years, *Tagammu* took no initiatives whatsoever, people only sat in the party's headquarters and in the offices of the newspaper, discussing, not taking any action to the streets.”⁸⁰⁴

A Secular Alliance

Tagammu's political shift to the right was entwined with a growing enmity against Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. When I met in 2008 and 2009 with the charismatic Sharif Fayyad, a leading member of *Tagammu*, he claimed that the Egyptian people were not yet ready for real democracy, as fair elections would result in a landslide for the Muslim Brothers. Although the Mubarak State was not at all democratic, he considered it to be a lesser evil than an Islamic State. According to Fayyad, the Brotherhood mobilized religion to capture the “simple minds” of the Egyptian people, especially in the countryside, where feudal relations and backward forms of consciousness were still dominant: *Tagammu* should first support the establishment of a liberal democracy and full capitalist relations of production, before it would be able to fruitfully advance the idea of socialism.⁸⁰⁵

The rationale of the anti-Islamist stance was that, despite their sometime “civil” and “democratic” rhetoric, the *Ikhwan* were, because of their essential nature as “Islamic fascists”, fundamentally against a genuine secular, liberal democratic system. Their pro-democratic stance was an element of a “double discourse” that

⁸⁰¹ Farag 2007.

⁸⁰² Al-Ahram Weekly 2000a.

⁸⁰³ Al-Ahram Weekly 2003.

⁸⁰⁴ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

⁸⁰⁵ Interview with Sharif Fayyad, Cairo, 26 February 2008.

hid a real agenda of the establishment of a theocratic State.⁸⁰⁶ Even more so than the regime, which at least preserved some elements of a secular and civil State, Islamism was a reactionary force, as the historical experience of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran clearly showed. The intimidation and censorship of secular and leftist intellectuals, and the assassination of Farag Foda in 1992, reinforced the perception that secularism itself was under siege by Islamism. Because the Left was weak, it could not stand up against Islamism but in an alliance with the regime – an idea that had been a minority position within the Left throughout the 1980s.⁸⁰⁷

This line of thought produced a “secular alliance” against the *Ikhwan* between, on the one hand, some *Tagammu*, Communist, liberal, and nationalist leaders and intellectuals, and, on the other, the Mubarak State.⁸⁰⁸ For example, secular leftists supported the repressive 1993 Unified Law that granted government the power to intervene in the elections of the professional associations in order to curb the power of the *Ikhwan*.⁸⁰⁹ The government, for its part, integrated secular intellectuals into its project by (re)building and (re)financing cultural institutions such as the Cairo Book Fair,⁸¹⁰ the Cairo Opera, and the Alexandria Library, and by opening up new money streams and platforms for writers and artists: “*Thus, within a decade, the state went from being one of the chief obstacles to cultural production, to one of its chief protectors and subsidizers.*”⁸¹¹ The “real” war against the Islamists was articulated in the domain of cultural politics, with secular intellectuals and parties playing the part of the State’s enlightened allies against the dark forces of religious reaction.⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁶ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 374.

⁸⁰⁷ Flores 1993: 38; Colla 2011b.

⁸⁰⁸ Naguib 2009: 170.

⁸⁰⁹ Abdelrahman 2009: 41-42.

⁸¹⁰ During the 1993 Cairo Book Fair, President Mubarak claimed that he aimed “...to spare Egypt the fate of Algeria...” (In: Abdalla 1993: 29)

⁸¹¹ Colla 2011b.

⁸¹² Ibid.

The Fourth Wave

A New Left?

In a 2007 article for MERIP Egyptian blogger and leftist activist Hossam al-Hamalawy distinguished between an “old” and a “new” Left. Egypt’s New Left represented an organizational, ideological, and generational renewal. From an organizational perspective, the New Left was rooted in the emergence of groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and of a leftist human rights’ community. Ideologically, the New Left rejected the strategy of the “secular front” and the enmity of *Tagammu* and the ECP towards Islamism. Lastly, the New Left attracted a new generation of young militants to radical politics, overcoming the gerontocracy of the fossilized parties of the “third wave”.⁸¹³ Al-Hamalawy’s claim of the rise of a New Left in Egypt is, in general, correct, although I argue that his conception of the composition of this “fourth wave of communism” is a little partisan and restrictive, because of his own RS membership.

The roots of the New Left can be traced back to the 1980s, when leftists became dissatisfied with the policies of *Tagammu* and the ECP. For example, the disengagement of *Tagammu* from grassroots politics and its rapprochement with the regime led the Revolutionary Current (RC) of Michel Kamal, one of the most influential wings of the ECP, to claim that the “legal Left” was a means for the regime to corrupt the communist movement, integrating the radical left in the democratic façade of the State consensus. The RC defected from the ECP in 1989 to form the small People’s Socialist Party.

A more important force on the Left were the RS. At the end of the 1980s a group of young Marxists set up a reading group, criticizing the Stalinist traditions of the Egyptian communist movement. This informal political circle was in 1991 formally established as the RS, using the trade union elections as a jump board.⁸¹⁴ In 1995 they established the Center for Socialist Studies (CSS) in Giza, which became their legal front.⁸¹⁵ In the same period there was a discussion and subsequently a split in the organization, regarding the question of open work. A part of the RS argued that it was not yet the time for open work in the streets and

⁸¹³ Al-Hamalawy 2007.

⁸¹⁴ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010; Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

⁸¹⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

that the group should focus on propaganda and producing its newspaper. This faction split and established itself as *Tahrir al-'Umal* (Workers' Liberation) around the paper *Sharara* (Spark).⁸¹⁶

In 2002 the groups reunited, since the Second Palestinian Intifada had solved the question of open work in practice.⁸¹⁷ Yet, at once, a new debate opened up concerning the nature of the united front within the developing civil-democratic movement. The second half of the 1990s had seen an increasing cooperation between leftist, Nasserist and Islamist groups at the grassroots level, especially in the Cairo and Ayn Shams universities, around a shared anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist agenda.⁸¹⁸ This experience led a majority of RS leaders to advocate a broad front of "anti-imperialist" forces, involving not only socialists and communists, but also Nasserists and Islamists. A minority supported a united front that was only composed of leftist forces, excluding the *Ikhwan* and other Islamist groups.⁸¹⁹

In an interview I conducted in 2009 with Baho Abdul, a member of the RS and of the *Tadamon* workers' solidarity group, she claimed that the politics of the RS differed from those of the Old Left on three fundamental issues: "*First: our position towards the Muslim Brothers and... our view on anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle, and the whole religion debate. Second: the question of reform or revolution, trying to push for change from below or above. Third: the question of how to pursue development.*"⁸²⁰ The ideology, tactics, and strategy of the RS constituted a critique of the Stalinist traditions of the Egyptian communist movement – a critique that was strongly influenced by the ideas of the neo-Trotskyist⁸²¹ British Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). Firstly, they rejected a "stagist" perspective on the (post-)colonial revolution in favor of Trotsky's concept of *permanent revolution*. Secondly, *pace* the "dead mass parties" of the "legal" Left, they advanced the Leninist notion of an active and vibrant vanguard party. Thirdly, from the

⁸¹⁶ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 7 October 2010; Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

⁸¹⁷ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 7 October 2010.

⁸¹⁸ Abdelrahman 2009: 42; Schwedler and Clark 2006: 10.

⁸¹⁹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 7 October 2010.

⁸²⁰ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo 10 May 2009.

⁸²¹ "Neo"-Trotskyist because the SWP differed in some important respects from "orthodox" Trotskyism. For example, Tony Cliff analyzed the USSR as a "state capitalist" instead of a "proletarian Bonapartist" society. See Cliff 1974. The American University in Cairo (AUC) in particular became an intellectual space for leftists students to encounter heterodox Marxist ideas and international organizations.

reading of Chris Harman's *The Prophet and the Proletariat*,⁸²² they derived the idea that the cultural context of Egypt necessitated a tactical alliance with Islamist youth around a shared anti-imperialism, in order to win these layers for the socialist Project.⁸²³

The rapprochement between *Tagammu* leaders and the Mubarak State also alienated Nasserists and leftist nationalists from the "legal" Left. In 1992 they split from *Tagammu* and founded the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party (ADNP). In 1996 a group led by Hamdeen Sabahi left the ADNP, establishing *hizb al-Karama* (Dignity Party). In contradistinction to the ADNP, *al-Karama* explicitly and unambiguously advocated political pluralism and civil democracy: "*We are socialist but we also believe in democracy.*"⁸²⁴ *Al-Karama* oriented itself to street politics and participated in alliances with other political forces against the government.

Other communists and leftists withdrew from the political arena altogether and engaged with movements from below through organizations of the NGO-type. Yussef Darwish and Kamal Abbas, for example, established in 1991 the Helwan-based Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), focusing on offering services, solidarity campaigns and education to workers.⁸²⁵ Within a few years the CTUWS was also active in other industrial areas, such as 10 Ramadan City, Mahalla, and Nag Hammadi. The foundation of the CTUWS anticipated the rise of civil-democratic NGOs and human rights centers in the 1990s, of which the Hisham Mubarak Law Center (HMLC) was one of the most influential. HMLC was established in 1999 to defend the rights of workers and political activists. The center offered legal advice, contacts with the media and support in court cases, as well as organizing seminars to raise awareness among workers of their labor rights. The center's Cairo offices hosted meetings of political committees, movements and parties, such as 6 April and *Tadamon*, thereby becoming a hub of the democratic opposition in the next decade.⁸²⁶

⁸²² Harman 1994. See *Chapter 13 Islamism in the Neoliberal Age*.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁴ Interview with Tareq Said, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

⁸²⁵ Beinun and al-Hamalawy 2007b.

⁸²⁶ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 13 October 2010; Interview with Osama Muhammad Khalil, Cairo 13 October 2010.

The Trend for Change

By the year 2000, the “legal” Left, and especially *Tagammu*, was but the historical remnant of the failed Prince of the second half of the 1970s. Once it had been a party of some 200,000 members, but the integration of its leaders and politics in the Mubarak post-populist and neoliberal bloc had reduced its active cadre to a few hundreds. From the 1990s onwards, *Tagammu* was a party in crisis. The grassroots movements of the 2000s deepened the malaise of the legal Left, because they saliently revealed its separation from the masses, and its inability to give systematic and coherent assistance to the subaltern struggles. Husayn Abd al-Razik, a leader of *Tagammu*’s old guard, admitted that: “For years, *Tagammu* took no initiatives whatsoever, people only sat in the headquarters and in the newspaper, discussing, not going outside, on the streets.”⁸²⁷ He added that: “The last two, three years, however, we have been more active, organizing demonstrations, conferences and sit-ins in the streets.”⁸²⁸

Still, the increased participation in street politics was realized in spite of the leadership rather than because of it. According to Ahmed Belal, almost all active members were against the leadership, which “occupied” party positions but did not “lead” the party in any way. There was a clear divide between, on the one hand, the political activity of the national leadership, which did not engage in grassroots politics, but instead dominated *Tagammu*’s representation in the media and in parliament; and, on the other, the leaders of local branches, who often participated in the struggles and movements from below. Within the branches, the political authority of directive intellectuals was not determined by their formal party position, but by their level of militancy and engagement in local struggles. Furthermore, much like in the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations, added to the ideological and organizational disagreements, there was a generational conflict. The *Tagammu* and ECP party leadership consisted of mostly elderly cadres who had led the communist movement in the 1950s, 1960s and, at best, the 1970s, and now blocked the youth’s access to functions and positions within the party.⁸²⁹ Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, a *Tagammu* leader of the Giza independent teachers’ movement concurred with Belal’s analysis:

⁸²⁷ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

⁸²⁸ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

⁸²⁹ Conversation with Ahmed Belal, Mahalla, 20 May, 2009; Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

In every movement you can find a member of Tagammu, but the leaders of the party are a tight circle and they only support their members in words. They don't prevent us from doing anything, but neither do they listen to us. This is a big problem in Tagammu... The leaders are close to the regime, they are afraid of the state, so they keep things under control.⁸³⁰

In opposition to the "formal" leadership, leftist activists and leaders in *Tagammu* established the Trend for Change. A main obstacle for the Trend for Change was the sustained entryism of rightist ECP members in *Tagammu*. Husayn Abd al-Razik, a communist himself, acknowledged, but minimalized the historical and contemporary presence of members of the ECP in *Tagammu*:

The Communist Party played a very important role in building Tagammu. Rifaat Said and myself and many others of the leadership were members of the Communist Party. And the Communist Party decided that we, many of us, had to play a role in building this party. At that time comrade Nabil al-Hilali who was the most important leader of the Communist Party had a meeting with Khaled Mohi Al-Din and he gave them the names of the members of the Communist Party who would leave their posts in the Communist Party and become members in Tagammu, including of course Rifaat Said and others; many of the members of the Communist Party from Alexandria to Aswan became members of Tagammu. After a few years the Communist Party had the decision that those who took leadership positions in Tagammu had to leave their leadership posts in the Communist Party. They could no longer attend any meeting of the Communist Party...

In 1979 and 1980 there were two cases brought before court against the leadership of the Communist Party, the majority were members of Tagammu, so they decided that they had to leave and it happened from that time. Even some of the members of the Communist Party who became leaders in Tagammu, not all of them of course, few of them took a position against the relation with the Communist Party. Anyhow, the relation between Tagammu and the Communist Party is very clear now. The membership of Tagammu differs from the membership of the Communist Party. The Communist Party has also become weaker, because many cadres left it for Tagammu and even if they have members in the Communist Party the majority of them work in Tagammu. Also, the Communist Party has lost many of its leadership, now there is a new generation. I don't think that we have a problem. Anyhow, there is a dying connection between the Communist Party and us.⁸³¹

⁸³⁰ Interview with Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, Cairo, 22 May 2009.

⁸³¹ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

Abd al-Razik's narrative about the relation between *Tagammu* and the ECP stood in contrast to Ahmed Belal's experience:

In 2007 some party leaders started to talk about the future of the party and they made statements. We were against these and tried to organize a tendency for the party elections of 2008. We lost the elections because there was another group, called "Unite", which was more organized than us. This was the first election for our Trend and as we had no experience like the others they won. They are members of the Communist party and sympathizers of these members. We refuse the domination of the Communist party as they occupy all important leadership positions, while Tagammu should be the house of all left tendencies.⁸³²

For grassroots activists and leaders in *Tagammu*, the main strategic question was whether to remain in the party and fight the "formal" leadership for control over the party's apparatus or leave the legal Left and support the creation of an alternative, organic counter-hegemonic apparatus. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s many capable leaders, such as Mustafa Bassiouny, and Saud Omar, left the party to join other leftist formations. They argued that they better invested their energy and time in a new political Project that was actively engaged with grassroots struggles, than in an endless factional infighting in the dusty offices of *Tagammu*. Other militants argued that, despite its degeneration, *Tagammu* still owned a lot of political "capital" in the shape of its traditions, its position within the collective memory of the workers' movement as the "house of the Left", its character as a national leftist party with branches in the whole country, its material legacy of offices, meeting rooms, et cetera. For these activists, the rise of the civil-democratic and workers' movement was an opportunity to transform their fossilized organization (back) into a counter-hegemonic apparatus:

Now Tagammu has the best chance to transform, because the regime is actually very weak. Tagammu is the only party with members in all the movements. But only if the party has the will to do so. The leaders don't want this, they have a good relation with the regime. We want to change the party.⁸³³

Wael Tawfiq had been a member of the RS up until 2010, but seeing the resistance within *Tagammu*, he decided to join the party to reinforce the leftist opposition.

⁸³² Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

⁸³³ Interview with Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, Cairo, 22 May 2009.

*There is a conflict in Tagammu right now. There are those who want Tagammu to play a bigger role than its limited part as a democratic power which gathers all tendencies. We are working against the party leadership. I think that Tagammu has the most leaders with the ability to work in the streets and around social issues. Of course not as strongly as the RS, but they have more numbers and they are an organization which exists in the whole country, and they are legal and have a lot of sites in the country and a big number of members and leaders.*⁸³⁴

Ahmed Belal, however, was pessimistic with regard to the future of the Trend for Change as a mere faction for internal party elections.

*We can go to the provinces and organize activities but you cannot only go there to present yourself as a front for the elections. It is the activities which attract people to support us. People are disappointed in the Trend because they are only an electoral front and they do not organize activities. A comrade said he wanted to quit, but I convinced him to stay because we are the youth. Others in the Trend are old and they do not want to do anything. If the Trend loses the next party elections we will be finished. I believe the youth is the real actor of change because we do not only work about elections; we want to change the party. We are young and we have a lot of personal problems, problems of marriage, problems of work, while they have money and time. I told my Trend that we should call the leaders in the provinces and organize activities to prepare for the elections, but the older members in the Trend do nothing.*⁸³⁵

The discussion among *Tagammu* activists about whether to stay and fight in the party in order to transform its historical capital into a counter-hegemonic apparatus, or leave the sinking ship, still endured after the 25 January Revolution. The revolution prompted a sizeable group of labor activists and youth, led by Alexandria MP Abu al-Ezz al-Hariry, to leave the party and join the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, whereas other activists such as Ahmed Belal and Haisam Hassan remained in *Tagammu*, where they established the radical Union for Egyptian Socialist Youth (UESY) in opposition to the leadership-dominated Union of Progressive Youth (UPY).

⁸³⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁸³⁵ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

Old Skins

In Hossam al-Hamalawy's narrative, the novelty of the New Left resided in its innovative ideas, fresh generation, and new organizations. While this is certainly true, one should be careful not to simply equate the membership of the relatively new organizations – such as the RS and HMLC – with the New Left, and the rank-and-file of traditional parties – such as *Tagammu* and the ECP – with the Old Left. Throughout my fieldwork I met young and revolutionary militants of *Tagammu* and the ECP who were highly critical of their leaders. On the other hand, new parties, such as the “Democratic Left”, and many of the human rights organizations, defended a clear reformist and liberal-democratic agenda. Although the RS drew upon a new generation of leftist students from the 1980s and 1990s to form the core of their organization, they also forged alliances with workers and independent leftists from the “older” generation of the 1960s and 1970s. Conversely, *Tagammu* and the ECP – parties where power was firmly in the hands of a pro-regime gerontocracy – still attracted layers of youth who engaged with the street politics of the 2000s. Simply put, there was also a (limited) New Left in the Old Left. What ultimately separated the “new leftists” from the “old leftists” was an engagement with street politics. The reconfiguration of small leftist forces in the 1990s planted the seeds for a New Left, but activists remained largely isolated from the subaltern masses. The real turning point for a resurgence of Egyptian “politics from below” came with the Second Palestinian *Intifada* of September and November 2000.⁸³⁶ In the following section, I present a brief overview of the mobilizations since the year 2000 which saliently show the organic and spontaneous development of what I deem a grassroots **civil-democratic movement** in Egypt.

A Civil-Democratic Project

Rise of Street Politics

In 2000 students organized massive demonstrations in Cairo in support of the plight of the Palestinians – collective actions “from below” that ended two decades of political demobilization. Independent activists and some twenty NGOs established the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the

⁸³⁶ Abdelrahman 2009: 42; Schwedler and Clark 2006: 10.

Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI).⁸³⁷ Even though the foundation of the EPCSPI was a leftist initiative, it attracted Nasserist and Islamist activists who joined as individuals or as representatives from parties, syndicates, or NGOs. The Popular Committee organized solidarity demonstrations in Cairo and all major universities, convoys and relief campaigns, and a boycott of Israeli and Western commodities. The EPCSPI became a social and political network that, under pressure of international and domestic events, spawned new movements. It also became a platform for political discussion, coordination and cooperation between leftist, Nasserist, and Islamist activists.⁸³⁸ From March to September 2001 the EPCSPI organized sit-ins and hunger strikes in support of the *Intifada* and a demonstration in Tahrir Square to condemn USA support for Israel. Atrocities against Palestinians in April and May 2002 triggered new student demonstrations in Egyptian universities and a large rally was held in front of Cairo University. When students marched to the Israeli embassy, Central Security forces violently intervened. On 14 October, as the first public protest of its kind, Muhammad Hassanein Heikal condemned the “dynastic succession” by Gamal Mubarak.⁸³⁹

The war in Afghanistan and the looming intervention in Iraq gave a new impetus to the development of the existing solidarity networks. On 18 and 19 December the first conference against imperialist war and Zionist occupation was held in Cairo, an event that gathered a broad coalition of leftists, nationalists, and Islamists. In January and February 2003 small rallies in Cairo and other cities protested the preparations for war against Iraq. The military intervention in Iraq was greeted on 20 and 21 March with 20,000 Egyptians occupying Tahrir Square, which gave birth to the 20 March Movement.⁸⁴⁰ This rally saliently signaled the return of mass politics in Egypt.⁸⁴¹

Over the course of the next months, the anti-war and Palestinian solidarity movement began to tackle domestic issues. The third anniversary of the Second Palestinian Intifada on 27 and 28 September was transformed into a protest against the government.⁸⁴² The Second Cairo Conference in December

⁸³⁷ Howeidy 2005.

⁸³⁸ Abdelrahman 2009: 42-4.

⁸³⁹ Howeidy 2005.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.; Schwedler and Clark 2006: 10.

⁸⁴¹ Abdelrahman 2009: 43.

⁸⁴² Howeidy 2005.

emphasized the connection between the Mubarak government, US-imperialism, and Zionism.⁸⁴³ For the first time, the Brotherhood formally participated as an organization.⁸⁴⁴ In September 2004, the 20 March Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, the ECP, al-Karama, HMLC, and other organizations established the Popular Movement for Change with the slogan of free and democratic presidential elections. On 12 December the Popular Movement organized the first explicit anti-Mubarak demonstration with the central slogan of free and democratic presidential elections. Although it mobilized “only” 300 to 400 activists, at the time the event constituted a landmark in Egyptian “street politics” for its bold criticism of the President.⁸⁴⁵

On 21 February 2005 *Kefaya* (Enough) was established as a unitary movement of existing committees and campaigns. During the Cairo International Book Fair a second anti-Mubarak demonstration took place. In March the Muslim Brotherhood organized a separate rally demanding political reform. In April, judges and university professors followed suit. The month of May saw the emergence of the Youth for Change and Workers for Change, *Kefaya* offshoots who addressed social issues such as unemployment, housing and the need for independent trade unions. In June, the Writers for Change, Journalists for Change and Doctors for Change followed.⁸⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the Mubarak regime began to take the movement seriously. At the beginning of the 2000s the government had cautiously supported the Palestinian solidarity campaign and attempted to co-opt the movement. As the protests grew in numbers and shifted towards a criticism of domestic policies and the “dynastic succession” issue, the regime felt increasingly threatened by the movement which, because of its spontaneity and hybrid political constituency, appeared as a “vague multi-headed monster”.⁸⁴⁷ Central Security arrested hundreds of protesters and Muslim Brotherhood members and violently repressed the peaceful *Kefaya* demonstration of 25 May. On 4 June, former ministers and public figures close to the regime established the National Coalition for Democratic Change as a means to create a “bridge” between the regime and the opposition

⁸⁴³ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁴ Abdelrahman 2009: 43-4.

⁸⁴⁵ Howeidy 2005.

⁸⁴⁶ Howeidy 2005.

⁸⁴⁷ Abdelrahman 2009: 50-1.

movement. These diversionary tactics did not pacify the movement: on the contrary, on 8 June *Kefaya* organized a 2000 strong demonstration in memory of Saad Zaghlul.⁸⁴⁸

Collaboration

The New Left played a crucial role in the building and direction of the civil-democratic movement. Gihan Shabeen remembered that: “*We were noticeable, we were young... we are not so young now, but we were young compared to other leftists, and we were active. We loved to work in the streets.*”⁸⁴⁹ However, the scale and spontaneous dimension of the movement on the one hand and the participation of liberal, nationalist, and Islamist forces on the other, implied that “street politics” constituted a *field* for political work and struggle, rather than a simple *instrument* of leftist politics. *Kefaya* had galvanized layers of the urban youth and created spaces for contentious politics. The Muslim Brothers were increasingly engaged with the civil-democratic movement. For example, in 2004, they helped to organize the third Cairo Conference.⁸⁵⁰ Young and militant members of the Muslim Brotherhood built a shared activity-system with activists from the New Left, dissidents from *Tagammu* and the ECP, and progressive journalists from *al-Badil*, *al-Shorouk*, *al-Dostour*, *al-Masry Al-Yawm*, et cetera. The rise of internet activism further encouraged political discussion, the dissemination of information, and the mobilization of protest groups.⁸⁵¹

Even though the activity of these various groups was originally oriented towards solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian and Iraqi populations, it quickly became a collaborative Project that developed a goal of its own: a civil and democratic state. The activists and networks that emerged from the civil-democratic movement would eventually become the organizers of the first, small-scale demonstrations on 25 January, which turned into a nationwide popular revolution.⁸⁵² The poet Abd al-Rahman Yussef, son of the preacher Yussef al-Qaradawi and campaign leader of Muhammad al-Baradei, claimed that the civil-democratic movement of the 2000s also laid the spiritual and intellectual foundations of the 25 January Revolution:

⁸⁴⁸ Howeidy 2005.

⁸⁴⁹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

⁸⁵⁰ Abdelrahman 2009: 44.

⁸⁵¹ Hirschkind 2011b.

⁸⁵² Joya 2011: 369.

*We are talking about the spirit of the revolution. In the revolution a lot of different forces and ideas came together. It was not only a political issue, but also a humanist and ideological protest. The words of writers and poets had a big role in charging people with emotions and ideological ideas. The Egyptian revolution is the result of a long struggle, prepared by writers, poets and political activists. The revolution is about rejection, how to learn to say no. This rejection has been part of organized writers' opposition since the formation of Kefaya. This helped the political and trade union movements.*⁸⁵³

Yet in 2006 *Kefaya* appeared to be far from the spiritual and activist spark that would ignite a revolution some five years later. Firstly, the regime itself changed the constitution so that the president could be elected directly, one of the chief aims of the civil-democratic movement. Of course, at the same time, it made sure that Mubarak would succeed himself as president. Political cartoonist Salah Abd al-Azim recalled that: “After the presidential elections, when Mubarak succeeded, the movement suffered a setback and was convinced that Gamal Mubarak would become the new president.”⁸⁵⁴ Just as many other activists, this episode in the struggle demoralized him and he became politically inactive during the following years. Secondly, as a movement, *Kefaya* lacked a real directional center. It was scattered over bickering political families and prone to sectarian infighting. Thirdly, as a civil-democratic movement, *Kefaya* remained largely confined to the social circles of students, intellectuals (in the classic sense), urban professionals, and other middle class groups.⁸⁵⁵ As a whole, the network did not succeed in connecting its explicit anti-Mubarak rhetoric with the economic woes of the working class, the poor, and the peasantry.⁸⁵⁶ *Kefaya* spawned a number of more or less class-oriented groups, such as the 9 March Movement, the Coalition for the Defense of Health, Teachers Without a Trade Union, Doctors Without Rights, et cetera; but these grassroots committees were scattered and often focused on their own particular objects.

Already in 2005 the broad front between the Left, civil society groups, and the Brotherhood collapsed because *Tagammu* withdrew from the coalition.⁸⁵⁷ The lull

⁸⁵³ Interview with Abd al-Rahman Yusuf, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

⁸⁵⁴ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

⁸⁵⁵ Mackell 2012b: 21; Naguib 2011.

⁸⁵⁶ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 8 April 2009.

⁸⁵⁷ Interview with Essam al-Arian, Cairo, 10 March 2008.

in the civil-democratic movement after the presidential elections also blocked the development of a collaborative Project between the Society and secular opposition forces. There were still instances of cooperation between the *Ikhwan* and other political groups, but these moments had an *ad hoc*, local or particular character.

The regime did not have time to rejoice in the collapse of the civil-democratic movement, as the demise of *Kefaya* was intersected by the rise of the workers' movement, which would pose an even greater challenge to the Pharaoh. The acceleration of the privatization and liberalization process since 2004 stimulated a resurgence of the workers movement, which became the main vehicle for anti-regime protests after the collapse of *Kefaya*. Workers' strikes and collective actions re-interpellated and re-mobilized sections of the political Left, transforming their political practices and discourses, and creating new divides among leftists according to their attitudes towards the workers' movement.

CHAPTER 13

Islamism in the Neoliberal Age

...people... can be different in wealth as they differ in opinions, as they differ in color, and so on.

Essam al-Erian, Muslim Brother leader, Interview, Cairo 10 March 2008

Jihadism and Salafism

Even though secular leftists played an important role in initiating the first Palestinian solidarity campaigns, anti-war rallies, and *Kefaya* protests, it was the Muslim Brotherhood that was able and willing to mobilize tens of thousands of people in the streets.⁸⁵⁸ The Society proved to be an often vacillating, yet powerful ally of the broad anti-Mubarak opposition. From being either the unruly storm troopers or capitalist supporters of the Sadat bloc in the 1970s, the Egyptian Islamic movement had mutated and differentiated itself throughout the 1980s, crystallizing in the 1990s and 2000s into roughly three archetypes: *jihadis*, *salafis* and reformist Islamists.⁸⁵⁹ “Jihadism” encompasses militant, radical and often violent groups that aim to overthrow and/or conquer the State, by popular resistance, guerrilla tactics, or individual terrorism. “Salafism” groups all Islamic tendencies and organizations that focus their attention on “policing” the religious, cultural, and moral behavior of themselves and others – “commanding the good” and “forbidding the wrong”. “Reformists” are chiefly political movements or parties which, to some degree, accept the framework of (civil and democratic) politics – *hizbiyya* – and choose to participate in it.⁸⁶⁰

⁸⁵⁸ Naguib 2009: 155.

⁸⁵⁹ There is a whole scientific discipline – hyperbolically speaking – that produces categories and schemes to grasp the synchronically and diachronically heterogeneous nature of “political Islam”. My crude distinction between these three groups is not as sophisticated as, for example, Thomas Hegghamer’s ten categories (see Hegghammer 2009), but it serves the purpose of delineating the three main trends of the contemporary Egyptian Islamic movement.

⁸⁶⁰ These are archetypes since the real Islamic movements and groups often combine these aspects synchronically and/or diachronically. For example, *al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya* started as a salafist movement with jihadist characteristics in the 1970s, became a jihadist movement with salafist traits during the 1980s and 1990s, and then developed reformist tendencies that became dominant after the 25 January Revolution with the formal creation of its Construction and Development Party. Likewise, quietist (apolitical) salafist movements suddenly appeared on the stage of Egyptian politics in 2011, overcoming their disdain for *hizbiyya* and establishing various parties. This move was anticipated by Roel Meijer, when he keenly observed that: “...in a

Ideologically, jihadism had its roots in Sayyid Qutb's political interpretation of *jihad*, and especially its subsequent appropriation as the violent, armed struggle of a small, dedicated vanguard. In opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, most jihadis rejected *hizbiyya* – participation in political society – in principle, because of its corrupting influence and secular nature.⁸⁶¹ Sociologically, the jihadist movement was composed of a mixture of middle class elements, who had their exclusion from the post-populist bloc in common. During the 1970s and 1980s, rural and provincial-urban poor from Upper Egypt migrated to the peripheries of large cities such as Cairo, often seeking employment in “informal” economic sectors such as construction, services and petty trade. Because of the high cost of living in the urban centers, these social groups were entrenched in peripheral *ashwaiyyat*. In these “informal communities” the rural and provincial-urban migrants were joined with the city's “own” heterogeneous collection of impoverished youth, professionals, and newly married couples who lacked the financial capacity to live in the center.⁸⁶² The social and spatial marginalization of these layers, and the negligence of their plight by traditional political forces – including the Brotherhood – created a potential base for radical Islamist groups such as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*. The absence of working class organizations, and the presence of radical Islamist groups, diverted a potential class activity-system towards religious communalism, as Beinín explained: “*The adherence of labor contractors, foremen, and unskilled workers to the Islamic Group in Imbaba exemplifies the ability of a populist Islamist discourse to express the grievances of the poor while mediating conflicts that might otherwise have erupted on a class basis.*”⁸⁶³

Whereas the assassination of President Sadat failed to rouse mass popular support for an Islamic State, the retreat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan had shown many Egyptian warriors the possibility of defeating even that “Evil Empire” through guerrilla warfare. This experience laid the foundations of, on the one hand, the “local” activity of individual terrorism and guerrillaism in Central Egypt during the 1990s, and, on the other, of the shift towards “global

contentious age... apolitical Salafism associated with pietism can snap and tip over into an activist, even revolutionary movement at the crucial point when subservience is transformed into revolt.” (Meijer 2009b: 204)

⁸⁶¹ Meijer 2009b: 206-7.

⁸⁶² Bayat and Denis 2000: 198.

⁸⁶³ Beinín 2005a: 130.

jihād” – if Islamist resistance in Afghanistan had led to the defeat of the Soviet Union, direct attacks on the USA could lead to the demise of that *other* Evil Empire. When Islamist *mujahedeen* returned from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, they brought with them the convictions and methods of armed struggle against an illegitimate regime.

Unlike the salafists, jihadist organizations such as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* had clear political goals. From the 1990s on, the Islamic Group opposed Mubarak's passive revolution, protesting: "...the rise in land rents, political corruption, the extension of the state of emergency and infringement of human rights."⁸⁶⁴ In order to fight and weaken the State, the organization mainly targeted military personnel, civil servants, police, and tourists. From 1992 to 1997 *al-Gama'a* and the State were involved in a small civil war in central Egypt that claimed 1,500 lives.⁸⁶⁵ During this decade, "domestic" jihadist movements such as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* became estranged from the "global" jihadist organizations such as *al-Jihad*. The failure of overthrowing their own national governments led global jihadists to attack foreign targets such as the World Trade Center in 1993. Attacking imperialism "directly" was seen as a shortcut to the fall of the comprador regimes in their homelands.⁸⁶⁶

The terrorist acts of the Islamic Group provoked and justified a violent and authoritarian reaction of the State, which extended far beyond the repression of jihadist cells.⁸⁶⁷ The "war on terror" granted Mubarak's passive revolution a solid foundation from which to go on the offensive and restrict the civil and the political rights of the whole population. In the cities, the *ashwaiyyat* were overrun by Central Security forces and brought back under control of the State: for example Imbaba and Ayn Shams in 1992 and 1998. By the late 1990s, Islamist guerrillism was defeated. Despite the spectacular "event" of 9/11, as a movement, jihadism was on the retreat in Egypt in the 2000s. Terrorist organizations such as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* laid down their arms, renounced the use of violence, turned to reformism, and tried to set up a political party.⁸⁶⁸

⁸⁶⁴ Meijer 2009b: 207.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Beinin 2005a: 116.

⁸⁶⁸ Bayat 2011a.

Development of the Brotherhood

Brothers and Workers

During the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood was less interested in the constituency of radical Islamism – the rural poor and unskilled urban laborers – and instead focused on recruiting the better educated, yet impoverished middle classes. Moreover, unlike both the Left and the Islamic Group, its strategy of engagement with State-dominated civil and political society seemed to bear fruits. The Society combined a formal participation in parliament with a political activity in the mass organizations of the middle class and informal, local grassroots initiatives. In 1992 the Brotherhood confirmed its hegemony in the professional syndicates by its conquest of the journalist and bar associations, which were traditionally leftist and secular strongholds.⁸⁶⁹ Moreover, *Ikhwan* members established educational facilities and NGOs, which outnumbered their secular counterparts, and developed their own field of cultural production in civil society through books, newspapers, radio, television, and from the 1990s onwards: satellite television and the internet. They created a “shadow” religious establishment that criticized the State officials of al-Azhar, and influenced court rulings.⁸⁷⁰

After its successes in these domains of civil and political society, the *Ikhwan* sought to expand their influence over the industrial working class. Until the early 1990s the Brotherhood was a clear proponent of Sadat’s *Infitah*-project. However, the social impact of the acceleration of neoliberal reform in the 1990s, along with the Brothers’ rapprochement towards the workers, necessitated adjustments to the liberal-economic discourse.⁸⁷¹ Moreover, out of the Brotherhood’s absorption of the *Amal* party during the 1987 parliamentary elections, an Islamist-corporatist tendency emerged, led by Adil Husayn.⁸⁷² Husayn reformulated the classic Nasserist and post-populist idea of a moral economy along Islamic lines, but the substance remained the same: the employer has a duty towards the workers to be just and to pay a fair wage, while workers have a duty towards the employer to be productive and reliable.⁸⁷³

⁸⁶⁹ Beinin 2005a: 127; al-Ghobashy 2005b: 381.

⁸⁷⁰ Kandil 2008.

⁸⁷¹ Naguib 2009: 166-7.

⁸⁷² See above.

⁸⁷³ Beinin 2005a: 132

Be it in the name of the popular “national good” or the natural organicism of the religious community, the corporatist view denies a fundamental conflict of interest between labor and capital. Furthermore, in an age of privatization and liberalization, Islamic corporatism was framed within a traditional nationalist narrative that favored conspiracy theory over an analysis of the political economy of global capitalism. Israel and the USA were cast as the main antagonists in a geopolitical drama, putting Egypt under pressure to sell off its public assets to foreigners in order to weaken the country.⁸⁷⁴ For example, Said Husayni, *Ikhwan* MP in Mahalla, claimed that: “*The problem of privatizations in Egypt is that we have lost ownership of our industry. It is transferred to criminals or foreigners.*”⁸⁷⁵

The integration of leftist elements from the *Amal* party opened up a syndicalist branch of the Muslim Brothers that participated in trade union elections. The syndicalist discourse of the Brotherhood’s “Islamic Trend” in the 1991 trade union elections was surprisingly leftist – probably a means to engage with the Nasserist and leftist consciousness of most industrial workers. The *Ikhwan* defended the right to strike, criticized the neo-liberal program of the regime and especially the wholesale liquidation of the public sector, and resisted government meddling in the trade union elections.⁸⁷⁶ Increased poverty and a revived class struggle interpellated a “workerist” tendency within the Brotherhood, pitting the old bourgeois elite against young and militant layers, especially in Alexandria.⁸⁷⁷ The election program of 2004 moved the State back into economic discourse as an agent of modernization and social reform. Privatization was not wrong *in se*, but the manner in which the Mubarak-regime was using privatization weakened the State’s capacity in modernizing the economy and securing basic living standards, free medical care, pensions, welfare and education for the population. The Brotherhood attempted “...to incorporate a populist critique of neo-liberalism in its erstwhile pro-market discourse.”⁸⁷⁸

Yet, despite their rhetoric, the “syndicalist” Brothers did not actively organize militant collective actions in the trade union domain.⁸⁷⁹ There were *Ikhwan*

⁸⁷⁴ Beinin 2005a: 132

⁸⁷⁵ Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

⁸⁷⁶ Beinin 2005a: 132-3; Naguib 2009: 166-7.

⁸⁷⁷ Al-Khashab 2007.

⁸⁷⁸ Naguib 2009: 168.

⁸⁷⁹ Beinin 2005a: 133

workers, but there was no real structural relationship between the Brotherhood and organized labor.⁸⁸⁰ The Society was careful not to provoke the regime and not to alienate its own powerful conservative wing. In fact, because of their tradition of non-confrontation with the regime, the *Ikhwan* could excuse themselves from collective labor struggles, as the State left them little room for legal action.⁸⁸¹ The vacillating support of the Brotherhood for the workers only allowed it to achieve gains in the trade union field that were very modest compared to its successes in the professional syndicates.⁸⁸²

Civil-Democratic *Ikhwan*

During the 1990s, the Brotherhood took over the leading role of the Left in the anti-imperialist struggle. The Society mobilized support for the Palestinian Intifada, boasting strong ties with HAMAS, and against the Gulf War of 1991. These actions indicated a growing political independence of the Brotherhood's leaders from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. However, similarly to the resistance against neoliberalism, the "anti-imperialism" of the *Ikhwan* was not framed as a political-economic critique, but as a cultural-religious clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Moreover, in order to evade a confrontation with the regime, the complicity of the Egyptian government in the Palestinian and Iraqi cases was often downplayed.⁸⁸³ After the invasion of Iraq, the Brotherhood even organized a joint rally of "national unity" with the NDP against foreign aggression.⁸⁸⁴ Sameh Naguib explained this vacillating attitude of the Brothers as the outcome of a balancing act between the pressure of their rank-and-file, who demanded a radical anti-imperialism, and the pragmatism of the bourgeois leadership.⁸⁸⁵

For the Mubarak State the Brotherhood's boycott of the 1990 parliamentary elections, its victories in the 1992 municipal and professional associations' elections, and its "anti-imperialist" street politics, constituted a clear sign that parts of civil and political society were slipping from its control.⁸⁸⁶ The State

⁸⁸⁰ Al-Khashab 2007.

⁸⁸¹ Beinin 2005a: 135; Naguib 2009: 158.

⁸⁸² Beinin 2005a: 134.

⁸⁸³ Naguib 2009: 169.

⁸⁸⁴ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 389.

⁸⁸⁵ Naguib 2009: 169.

⁸⁸⁶ Kandil 2008.

sought to bring the Society back under its control by laws that decreased the influence of the *Ikhwan* in the professional associations, and by intimidating its members and leaders.⁸⁸⁷ State repression initiated a crisis within the Brotherhood, as it liquidated large sections of its cadre. In addition, the Society's "youth" leaders – i.e. the students of the 1970s generation – demanded a share in the movement's leadership. This would eventually lead to a split, whereby Abu Al-Ela Maadi established the *hizb al-Wasat* (Center Party).⁸⁸⁸

The government's attempt to retake full control over civil and political society led to splits in the whole opposition. As I discussed above, within *Tagammu*, criticism against Rifaat al-Said's "secular alliance" mounted, and young Nasserists left the ADNP to create the *al-Karama* party.⁸⁸⁹ The State's offensive against Islamism also forced the Brotherhood to start building a coalition of its own. In 1994 *Ikhwan* members visited the 82-year-old Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfuz after he was brutally stabbed in the neck by radical Islamists. This signaled the beginning of a rapprochement between Brothers and non-Islamist opposition forces. The political basis for a front between Islamists and Leftists was anti-imperialism – even though they often had a different view on the content of the concept – and the struggle for civil and human rights. State repression and an engagement in parliamentary elections moved the demand for democracy to the forefront of the Society's political agenda.⁸⁹⁰

The Brotherhood victories in the parliamentary elections of 2000 and 2005⁸⁹¹ were as much a reflection of the Society's popularity as the regime's desire to portray itself as the only real "secular" alternative to Islamist rule.⁸⁹² Yet the Brothers' political engagement, both in parliament and in the streets, with bread and butter issues and the problems of unemployment and police brutality, transformed the political, "reformist" wing of the movement into a civil-democratic actor. Reformists such as Essam al-Erian and Abd al-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh embraced a discourse of democracy, civil liberties, and human rights, and

⁸⁸⁷ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 381.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid. 386.

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid. 387.

⁸⁹⁰ Naguib 2009: 170.

⁸⁹¹ The Brotherhood secured 88 seats – some twenty percent of parliament – even though they only fielded 150 candidates and faced intimidation and fraud by the regime. The secular opposition only gained fourteen seats. (Naguib 2009: 156)

⁸⁹² Springborg 2006: 14.

engaged in practices of cooperation and negotiation with other civil society groups and political tendencies. This process led Mona al-Ghobashy to the claim that: *“Over the past quarter-century, the Society of Muslim Brothers (Ikhwan) has morphed from a highly secretive, hierarchical, antidemocratic organization led by anointed elders into a modern, multivocal political association steered by educated, savvy professionals not unlike activists of the same age in rival Egyptian parties.”*⁸⁹³ However, the reformists faced stiff competition from the traditionalist, conservative factions. Whereas the reformists occupied the “external” positions of the movement as members of parliament, spokesmen, leaders in the professional syndicates, et cetera, the conservatives continued to dominate most “internal” positions of power, especially the Guidance Bureau.⁸⁹⁴ In the wake of the 25 January Revolution reformist figures such as Abd al-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh came into conflict with the conservative leaders, and split from the Brotherhood.

A Leftist-Islamist Front?

Levels of Cooperation

Whereas the leaders of the Old Left saw the presence of the Muslim Brothers in the civil-democratic movement as a threat, New Left activists cautiously welcomed their participation. They argued that the detained, intimidated and tortured *Ikhwan* activists and leaders were as much victims of the dictatorship as their leftist, liberal, and Nasserist counterparts. Rather than being determined by an ideological essence of Islamist fascism, the political activity and consciousness of rank-and-file Brothers was constituted through their “lived experience” of, on the one hand, arbitrary State repression, and, on the other, cooperation and negotiation with other trends.⁸⁹⁵

Jillian Schwedler and Janine Clark distinguished between three levels of cooperation between leftists and Islamists: “tactical”, “strategic” and “ideational”. “Tactics” is basic cooperation in the sense of *“...joint activities on an issue-by-issue and short-term basis”*.⁸⁹⁶ Tactical cooperation does not require ideological justification. It can be a jointly organized demonstration or sit-in. At this point,

⁸⁹³ Al-Ghobashy 2005b: 373.

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid. 374.

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid. 375.

⁸⁹⁶ Schwedler and Clark 2006: 10.

tactical cooperation happens purely on the level of mobilization. Strategic cooperation, on the other hand, necessitates a political rationale. The “...engagement is sustained and encompassing of multiple issues”⁸⁹⁷, but this does not mean that there is a shared worldview. Cooperation shifts to the domain of more or less stable, shared, organizational forms, such as committees. Joint activity becomes a *system* of activity. Conversely, ideational or high-level cooperation “...is when groups remain distinct entities but strive to develop a collective vision for political, social, and economic reform.”⁸⁹⁸ Ideational cooperation takes place when the activity-system develops its own immanent goal: i.e. becomes a collaborative Project.

Tactical and strategic forms of cooperation could be found among all participants in the civil-democratic movement, even within the ranks of the “secular” Old Left. For example, the *Tagammu* offices in Cairo hosted the meetings of a “trans-party” labor committee, in which Muslim Brothers such as Yosry Bayumi participated.⁸⁹⁹ More politicized forms of cooperation, such as *Kefaya*, were often short-lived, however.⁹⁰⁰ Of all leftist forces, the RS developed the most profound engagement with Islamism and especially the Muslim Brotherhood. The RS condemned the “sectarian attitude” of the “anti-religious left”, and accused *Tagammu* and ECP leaders of alienating the radicalizing Muslim youth by its principal stand on secularism – thus driving them into the arms of the Brotherhood. Contrariwise to the Old Left, the RS did not see Islamism as an inherently fascist force, but as a confused anti-imperialist movement that could be reoriented to a project of socialism.

The Prophet and the Proletariat

The rationale for the collaboration between the RS and the *Ikhwan* was derived from Chris Harman’s *The Prophet and the Proletariat*.⁹⁰¹ Harman criticized sectarian as well as opportunistic attitudes of the Left towards the phenomenon of politicized Islam: “It has been a mistake on the part of socialists to see Islamist movements either as automatically reactionary and ‘fascist’ or as automatically ‘anti-

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

⁹⁰⁰ Interview with Ahmed Bahaa al-Din Shabeen, Cairo, 13 March 2008.

⁹⁰¹ Harman 1994.

*imperialist' and 'progressive'”*⁹⁰² Islamism was a distorted critique of capitalism from a utopian petty bourgeois class perspective. As such: “*Socialists cannot regard petty bourgeois utopians as our prime enemies.*”⁹⁰³ The Left had to side with the Islamists when their democratic rights were attacked by the capitalist State. This tactical stance was summarized in the slogan: “*With the Islamists sometimes, with the state never.*”⁹⁰⁴ However, at the same time, leftists had to acknowledge that:

*The Islamists are not our allies. They are representatives of a class which seeks to influence the working class, and which, in so far as it succeeds, pulls workers either in the direction of futile and disastrous adventurism or in the direction of a reactionary capitulation to the existing system – or often to the first followed by the second.*⁹⁰⁵

Instead of condemning Islamists as “fascists”, or embracing them as “anti-imperialist” allies, the Left had to develop a *critical* attitude of collaboration with Islamic social and political movements in order to *colonize* them:

...many of the individuals attracted to radical versions of Islamism can be influenced by socialists – provided socialists combine complete political independence from all forms of Islamism with a willingness to seize opportunities to draw individual Islamists into genuinely radical forms of struggle alongside them...

*When we do find ourselves on the same side as the Islamists, part of our job is to argue strongly with them, to challenge them – and not just on their organisations’ attitude to women and minorities, but also on the fundamental question of whether what is needed is charity from the rich or an overthrow of existing class relations.*⁹⁰⁶

When reading Harman’s nuanced “deontology” for a leftist collaboration with Islamist forces, one should keep in mind two crucial factors that determined his view. Firstly, he advanced leftist-Islamist collaboration in a decade when the Left in the Islamic world – and in the global community at large – was on the retreat. *The Prophet and the Proletariat* was written for leftists who were looking for ways to connect with the masses in conditions that were unfavorable for socialist

⁹⁰² Harman 1994.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid.

thought. In the Egyptian civil society, the weak Egyptian Left was confronted with a formidable Islamic movement that constituted an obstacle for its own development. Leftists could not simply ignore politicized Islam, but they were too feeble to overcome the obstacle on their own: they either had to rally the support of other forces – such as progressive liberals or the State – in order to vanquish it; or engage with it in a collaborative way in order to absorb it.

Secondly, Harman devised leftist-Islamist collaboration primarily as a “united front from below”: as a rapprochement between leftists and radicalized Islamic youth. The concept of the “united front” has a long history in Marxist politics. In general, it points towards the tactical or strategic alliance between workers and other subaltern groups, and the attitude of the proletarian vanguard vis-à-vis reformist class organizations and their members. A “united front from below” is the creation of alliances and connections with members of a subaltern group at the grassroots level, ignoring the formal structures which already organize it. A “united front from above” entails a formal coalition between organizations.

Class Politics?

The orientation of the RS towards the Islamic youth was realized through a united “anti-imperialist” front from below *and* above. The united front from below was effected by struggling together: by supporting solidarity campaigns against the detainment and torture of Islamist activists by the state; by sharing prison cells with Muslim Brothers; and by encouraging individual Brotherhood members to participate in demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of collective action and street protest. Throughout the 2000s, the united front from above with the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Amal* party was established through “tactical” and “strategic” forms of cooperation: jointly organized demonstrations; the Cairo Conferences; and the establishment of the Free Student Unions, which consisted of members of the Revolutionary Socialists, Muslim Brother students, and independent leftists.

The cooperation between the RS and the *Ikhwan* led to harsh criticisms from members of both the Old and the New Left who doubted the desirability of a leftist-Islamist alliance. Arguments were raised against such a front on the basis of civil-democratic and class arguments. Ahmed Shabeen, founder and coordinator of *Kefaya*, told me that: “*We know that the Muslim Brothers are very dangerous; they want Egypt to be an Islamic state. We, leftists and nationalists and*

liberals, want Egypt to be a civil state... We defend our organization against any intervention of the Muslim Brothers.”⁹⁰⁷ Even though Ahmed Shabeen did not condone any “secular front” with the government and promoted street politics as an avenue for change, he shared the Old Left’s deep seated suspicions towards the Brotherhood. Amal Abd al-Hadi, a physician of the New Woman Foundation (NWF) NGO, was equally distrustful of the Brotherhood because of its patriarchic ideology and practices:

*They have changed, for sure. I mean, instead of saying ‘the woman’s place is at the house’ directly and bluntly they say: ‘women have the right to work and to education’... But their program does not offer women specific things... For me feminism means secularism. You can be an activist for women’s rights, regardless of your religious background. But feminism and religion don’t go together. Because you are speaking about patriarchy and all religions are patriarchal.*⁹⁰⁸

Essam Shabeen of the ECP, for his part, condemned the RS because of what he saw as a form of class collaboration: *“They are actually anti-left. They are working with the Muslim Brothers... the Brothers are rightists, even though they are against the government.”*⁹⁰⁹

When I finally got to meet RS blogger Hossam al-Hamalawy – after a friendly introduction by Guardian journalist Jack Shenker – over a quick cup of coffee in Nasr City, he pointed out, in defense against these accusations, that the “anti-religious” Left exaggerated the extent of the alliance between RS and *Ikhwan*.⁹¹⁰ Back in Mohandiseen, the Swedish journalist and expert in Egyptian social movements, Per Bjorkland, agreed that the RS had a much more critical stance towards the Brotherhood than its leftist counterparts argued.⁹¹¹ Baho Abdul, member of the RS and a founder of the *Tadamon* workers’ group, elucidated:

There was a temporary coalition during the Kefaya movement, for only two months with a few events, around some democratic demands. That’s all. It’s true that the Revolutionary Socialists have a different opinion towards the Muslim

⁹⁰⁷ Interview with Ahmed Bahaa al-Din Shabeen, Cairo, 13 March 2008.

⁹⁰⁸ Interview met Amal Abdelhadi, Cairo, 23 February 2008.

⁹⁰⁹ Interview with Essam Shabeen, Cairo, 5 April 2009.

⁹¹⁰ Conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009.

⁹¹¹ Conversation with Per Bjorklund, Cairo, 5 May 2009.

*Brothers, in the sense that we deal with them as we deal with every rightwing party. We are not like Tagammu: forging a "secularist" alliance.*⁹¹²

Nevertheless, Baho Abdul admitted that the alliance created problems, both of a practical and an ideological nature:

*In theory, when in a demonstration with the Brotherhood, we don't want each side to have their own slogans, but to have common slogans. In practice, when in a demo, the Muslim Brothers start shouting their slogans and we counter these with ours. They always break the rules... The original idea was to join the Muslim Brothers in their actions and criticize them. In practice, however, there has been too little criticism.*⁹¹³

In practice, cooperation between leftists, Nasserists and Islamists, often entailed clashes, tensions and sometimes even violence.⁹¹⁴ The idealized relations between "equal partners" during the negotiation phase of the activity of political cooperation differed from the real relations of power that materialized in the concrete performance of a jointly organized demonstration, committee, or conference. Moreover, in their fervor to correct what they perceived as the sectarian attitude of the "anti-religious" Left, the RS seemed to have bent the stick too much to the other side.

Consequently, there is a paradox to be found in the attitudes of both the Old and New Left towards the Muslim Brotherhood. The negative stance of the traditional "third wave" leftists towards the Muslim Brothers is a cynical self-fulfilling prophecy. By condemning the entire Islamist movement as Islamofascist or reactionary, they weaken the legitimacy of *Ikhwan* reformist tendencies, strengthening the position of the conservatives and radicals. Ironically, since the divide between Brothers and the *Tagammu* leadership in the 1990s, the political demands and discourses of both tendencies have come to resemble each other. Both parties are in favor of "honest" privatizations, a guiding role for the State in a free market economy, improved labor and civil rights, and liberal democracy. In fact, is the layer of Islamic capitalists that leads the Brotherhood perhaps not the best candidate for the elusive "national bourgeoisie", which the stage theory ideologues of *Tagammu* and the ECP deem necessary for Egypt's "independent

⁹¹² Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 10 May 2009.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

⁹¹⁴ Abdelrahman 2009: 43-44.

development"? *Tagammu's* "secular front" was of great service for the State as it prevented the coalescence of two opposition movements that shared a surprisingly similar political and economic outlook.

Unlike the "third wave" leftists, the Revolutionary Socialists radically rejected the notion of a "progressive bourgeoisie" in a colonial or postcolonial context. Educated in the Leninist and Trotskyist tradition, they stressed the capacity of the working class to lead the Egyptian masses in its struggle against imperialism. Because of the class nature of the workers' movement, a fight for democracy and national sovereignty conducted under proletarian hegemony would take on socialistic aspects. However, up until the Mahalla strikes, the united front tactics of the RS were **not** primarily oriented towards the existing workers' movement. The RS tried to reach out to the militant Islamist rank-and-file through an *ad hoc* united front "from below", discussing politics within the anti-imperialist and civil-democratic mass mobilizations. Furthermore, the RS engaged in a united front "from above" with the Brotherhood and other political tendencies, which materialized as "civil-democratic" and "anti-imperialist" fronts outside the workers' movement, through the activity-system of organizations such as the Free Student Union. Accordingly, the collaboration between the RS and the Brotherhood was not based on the class interests and mobilization of the workers' movement, but on civil-democratic demands – which were shared as much by secular right-wing parties such as *Wafd* or *Ghad*. Furthermore, through a focus on the defense of civil, human, and cultural rights – e.g. via solidarity campaigns against torture and in favor of the right to wear the headscarf on university campuses – the RS instructed the "Islamic youth" it sought to attract, not as a solidary ally of the workers' movement, but as a cultural civil-democratic Subject.⁹¹⁵

In a way, from the 1990s onwards, both the Old and New Left sought ways to develop forms of political activity in the context of an economic-corporate working class and a restricted civil society. Because of the relative strength of Islamism – and especially the *Ikhwan* – as an oppositional force in civil society and grassroots politics,⁹¹⁶ the ideological and tactical attitude of leftists towards the

⁹¹⁵ When the Mubarak State attacked religious symbols, one could mobilize around the right of the individual to freely practice his or her religion – interpellating a civil-democratic Subjectivity – or against the class nature of the coercive State apparatus – interpellating a class Subjectivity.

⁹¹⁶ Kandil 2008.

Brotherhood became a central point in the development of leftist politics and Subjectivities. Even though leftists differed in their analyses of the nature of the regime, of the role of the party, of strategy, of imperialism, of the working class, et cetera, throughout the 2000s they shared an engagement with the Islamist problematic. Islamism mediated the politics of both the Old and the New Left. The two tendencies equally established fronts with bourgeois forces in order to expand their influence. The “secular” as well as the “anti-imperialist” fronts derived their rationale from non-class politics, and primarily revolved around civil-democratic rights. As such, they were rather *popular* than *united* fronts.⁹¹⁷ However, whereas, in general, the Old Left leaders turned away from grassroots movements, pursuing a front “from above” with the State and liberal secular parties, the New Left at least engaged with street politics, planting the seeds of the civil-democratic movement.

It is ironical that Harman’s “defensive” strategy of leftist-Islamist collaboration was applied most vigorously by the RS in the decade that finally saw the resurrection of grassroots political systems of activity in which leftist ideas and modes of struggle could thrive. To the consternation of many leftist forces, the RS would even continue its “critical support for” the Brotherhood during the run-off between Muhammad Morsy and Ahmed Shafiq in the “revolutionary” presidential elections of 2012.⁹¹⁸

The RS’ defense of the civil and human rights of Brotherhood *activists* against the transgressions of the Mubarak State in the 1990s and 2000s had developed into a “popular front” strategy with the conservative bourgeois *leadership* of the *Ikhwan* against the “bigger evil” of “anti-bourgeois military dictatorship”.⁹¹⁹ Likewise, *Tagammu* leaders continued their “secular front” to the extreme of “critically supporting” the “ex-regime” presidential candidate Ahmed Shafiq against the “bigger” evil of reactionary Islamism.

⁹¹⁷ See the popular fronts between communists, nationalists, and liberals in France and Spain during the 1930s.

⁹¹⁸ Socialist Worker 2012.

⁹¹⁹ Revolutionary Socialists 2012.

PART IV

The Mahalla Strike Movement

Introduction

In the decade leading up to 2011, the baton of rebellion was passed back and forth repeatedly between two distinct categories of political actors. One category is that of the bourgeois groups, led by intellectuals and activists, focussed in Cairo and Alexandria, and focussing on political rights and broad systematic changes. ...As Kifaya faltered and fell by the way side, the second category – working class groups – organised around economic demands, often quite local, and strongest in the industrial cities of the Nile Delta and along the Suez Canal, began to rise. These in turn inspired more bourgeois activists, and an increasingly intense feedback loop was created.

Austin Mackell (2012b: 21)

Twin Pillars of Revolution

In the citation above, Austin Mackell pointed to the twin pillars of the revolution: forms of “political” and “economic” protest that emerged from the 1990s onwards and were oriented against the offensive of the passive revolution.⁹²⁰ In later chapters I analyze the “political” and the “economic” as the two alternating moments of the revolution. The interpenetration and reciprocity of these movements was much more problematic than a straightforward passing back and forth of “the baton of rebellion”, however. Firstly, even though the two most salient shapes of the political and economic protests were, respectively, *Kefaya*, and the workers’ mobilizations and organizations that the Mahalla strikes initiated, there were many other instances of struggle, especially in the “economic” field. For example, one of the first subaltern groups that began to revolt systematically – yet in a fragmented way – against neoliberal reform were the farmers, but they were not able to create “an increasingly intense feedback loop” with the civil-democratic movement as the workers did. Moreover, it even took the workers fifteen years to transform their defensive struggles into a semi-coherent movement that was able to interpellate political activists. Before the Mahalla strikes between 2006 and 2008 there were many other labor conflicts in

⁹²⁰ I do not intend to use “political” and “economic” as fixed and absolute categories. Economic protests over wages, access to water, lands, et cetera, often presupposed a political critique, and vice versa. However, the distinction between the two categories of protests is useful in so far that protests often *begin* as merely “economic” or “political” movements, and in their trajectory *might* develop a more explicit and “integral” critique. The fact that movements are either “political” or “economic” is not just an analytical distinction, but a predicament for the development of these Subjects.

the textile sector: in 1994 7,000 workers of the Kafr al-Dawwar Spinning and Weaving Company occupied their factory; in 1998 workers of the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company protested the dismissal of 6,000 of the 8,700 workers; and in 2005 there was a four month sit-in at the Qalyub Spinning Company.⁹²¹ Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there have been numerous “economic” protests, by farmers, villagers, and workers, but these remained isolated and fragmented.⁹²² The government of Ahmed al-Nazif intensified the privatization and liberalization process, and deepened the economic predicament of many subaltern actors. The importance of the Mahalla movement was not that it was the first worker protest, but that it initiated a development of the worker Subject away from its economic-corporate condition.

Secondly, as I discuss in the next chapters, the reciprocity between the civil-democratic and the workers’ movement did not unambiguously develop both Projects. Workers were often suspicious of civil-democratic actors, and political activists frequently approached the class protests in a colonizing and commodifying way. Despite victories and successes – such as the establishment of four independent trade unions – the relation between civil-democratic and proletarian activism remained weak. The twin pillars of revolution continued their existence as separate systems of activity, which sometimes interacted and collaborated, but often followed their own discrete goals. They were temporarily united in the revolutionary process, only to be differentiated again after the fall of Mubarak.

Overview

In *Chapter 14 The Mahalla Strikes* I briefly sketch the background of the industrial complex of Ghazl al-Mahalla. Subsequently, I present a short chronology of the strikes between 2006 and 2008. Because these worker actions have been already documented in detail – especially by Joel Beinin⁹²³ – I focus my attention on the analysis of the movement in the following chapters. *Chapter 15 Development of the Strike* discusses the strike movement from the perspective of its development as a collaborative Project or social Subject, and its struggle for “vertical” and

⁹²¹ Beinin and al-Hamalawy 2007a.

⁹²² Bassiouny and Said 2007.

⁹²³ E.g. Beinin 2007; Beinin 2009a; Beinin 2009b; Beinin 2009c; Beinin 2011a; Beinin and al-Hamalawy 2007a; Beinin and al-Hamalawy 2007b.

“horizontal” coherence. After the defeat of the uprising of 6 April 2008, the Mahalla workers lost their position as the vanguard of the strike movement. However, the workers’ movement continued its developmental trajectory, principally by the formation of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU) and other “trade unionist” neoformations. With this outline of the development of the Strike in mind, I turn to the role of intellectuals and their types of assistance in *Chapter 16 Intellectuals offfor the Strike*. I focus in particular on the role of non-proletarian actors in the development of the strike movement. After the disintegration of the civil-democratic movement, many of these actors were drawn to the salient workers’ movement. I discuss the various types of assistance lent by political activists, journalists, artists, and human rights activists.

Whereas *Chapter 16 Intellectuals offfor the Strike* presents different *types* of assistance, *Chapter 17 A Deontology of Assistance* elaborates the various “ethico-political” modes of assistance in which non-proletarian actors supported the worker Subject. I follow Andy Blunden’s typology of non-recognition, colonization, commodification, and solidarity. Solidarity is found to be the necessary mode of assistance that encourages a dialectical pedagogy. However, solidarity in itself does not guarantee a form of assistance that really develops the worker Subject. In *Chapter 18 The Proletarian ZPD* I draw a picture of the debate among actors on the capacities of the workers’ movement as a trade unionist and political Project. This is followed by *Chapter 19 Roads to Counter-Hegemony*, which investigates the various counter-hegemonic Projects that were in the making before the 25 January Revolution. This chapter concludes both *Part III Against the Pharaoh* and *Part IV The Mahalla Strike Movement*, and anticipates the debates about the character of the revolutionary Project that emerged after the fall of Mubarak.

CHAPTER 14

The Mahalla Strikes

Where are the men? Here are the women!

Women workers initiating the 7 December 2008 Mahalla strike

Ghazl al-Mahalla

The strikes of the textile workers of Ghazl al-Mahalla – the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the Nile delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra – can be seen as a turning point in the sociogenesis and emancipatory struggle of the Egyptian working class since the 1980s, because of the scale, the intensity, the success, and the impact of the protests. The industrial complex in Mahalla is of economic and symbolic importance to the whole Egyptian workers movement. Today Ghazl al-Mahalla is the biggest factory in the whole of the Middle East, occupying 1,000 acres of land and employing some 27,000 workers. It is not only a proletarian space – a small society entirely made up of workers and their families – it also constitutes a historical-generational unit of workers whose parents and grandparents were employed in the same factory.

In a way, Mahalla al-Kubra was the birthplace of Egypt's modern industry, as well as its industrial working class. The national capitalist Talat Harb founded the factory in 1927 in a location close to the Delta cotton fields and near to a large reservoir of "proletarianizable" labor, using "indigenous" capital drawn from the newly established Bank Misr.⁹²⁴ In the 1930s it accounted for twenty percent of all Egypt's exports.⁹²⁵ Since its foundation, Ghazl al-Mahalla has often acted as the vanguard of the working class, initiating important strikes and articulating the interests of the whole Egyptian working class.⁹²⁶ Whenever Mahalla workers won an industrial victory, this led to a general upturn of industrial action in the whole of Egypt. The first real strike took place in 1938, when workers demanded a change in their work pattern from two shifts of twelve hours to three shifts of eight hours. Their actions were still framed within a nationalist Subjectivity of

⁹²⁴ Beinin and Lockman 1987: 275. Operations started in 1931, however, with an original workforce of 15,000.

⁹²⁵ Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹²⁶ Beinin and al-Hamalawy 2007a.

resistance against British neocolonialism, and they tried to negotiate their rights within the boundaries of productivity and profitability of their “national” factory.⁹²⁷

In 1947 workers held another strike, demanding the reinstatement of worker leaders who had demanded better working conditions. Tanks entered Mahalla to suppress the strike movement. Three workers were killed, and seventeen injured.⁹²⁸ Even though the strike was indicative of a growing sense of solidarity among workers, its defeat paralyzed worker actions in Mahalla until 1952. Emboldened by the Free Officers Coup, workers organized a strike against factory management, one month after Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s capture of State power. The strike was, however, brutally repressed. In exchange for economic concessions, the trade union movement pledged its loyalty to Nasser, effectively preventing itself from becoming an independent political force. The colonization of the workers’ movement by the Nasserist regime prevented industrial actions until 1967.

After the Six Day War, the regime started to abandon its socialistic guardianship over the working class. Sadat’s Infitah prompted new industrial actions in Ghazl al-Mahalla. In 1975 workers returning to the factory after the October War led a strike for better working conditions: “...workers took over the factory... demanding overtime pay, extension of the employment reforms to industrial workers, and improved health conditions.”⁹²⁹ Worker leader Hamdi Husayn explained that the nationalist Subjectivity of the previous decades was transforming into forms of class consciousness and activity:

The most important thing about the strike of 1975 was that it was poor workers against capitalism. They entered the luxurious apartments of the engineers and they took food from the fridge. They tied the food to ropes and started waving it from the balcony to incite the other demonstrators. That’s how the famous quote started: “they eat pigeons and chickens, we are tired of eating beans. And the beans are tired of us!”⁹³⁰

Mubarak continued Sadat’s program of liberalization and privatization, but at a slow, skulking pace. In 1985 and 1986 Mahalla workers protested, demanding

⁹²⁷ Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹²⁸ Ibid.

⁹²⁹ Posusney 1996: 229.

⁹³⁰ In Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

that they be paid for Fridays, their weekly day off.⁹³¹ Factory management gave in and granted them a 30 day monthly wage.⁹³² Two years later they were back at the barricades. Mubarak cancelled the educational allowances to workers, which prompted, within hours, some 20,000 Mahalla workers to take to the streets in order to contest the decision. Since the decision was taken at the highest political level, the workers' mode of protest was increasingly politicized as well. Hamdi Husayn recalled that: *"We made a coffin draped in black cloth and with Mubarak's picture on it. We walked out on 21 September and that was the first time we shouted: "Down with Hosni Mubarak." That was the first time people clearly stated it."*⁹³³ The strike was brutally repressed by security forces. Worker leaders were detained and lost their jobs, and/or were relocated to workplaces away from Ghazl al-Mahalla and their families. The defeat of the 1988 strike paralyzed the Mahalla workers' actions throughout the 1990s. Only in 2006 did the Mahalla workers move again in force.

On the Offensive

On 3 March 2006 Prime Minister Nazif promised all public-sector manufacturing workers a raise of their annual bonus equal to a two-month wage. But in December the bonus was nowhere to be seen on the Mahalla workers' paycheck. The Ghazl al-Mahalla management and the Minister of Labor refused to pay out the promised bonus. Mahalla worker Amal al-Said remembered that:

*We complained to the syndicate and to the factory management. But all to no avail. So we decided to strike. We wanted increased production incentives, more food allowance, better working conditions, and the two-month bonus. We closed all the mills to go on strike in Talaat Harb Square. We stayed there.*⁹³⁴

They refused their salaries and on 7 December at least 10,000 workers protested in front of the factory gates. When the security forces tried to shut down the factory the next morning, some 20,000 workers demonstrated. Their rally was joined by

⁹³¹ Posusney 1996: 225.

⁹³² Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹³³ In Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹³⁴ Ibid.

students and women from the urban community.⁹³⁵ Wedad al-Demerdash explained that it was the women workers who initiated the strike:

*The men tried to convince us to go on strike. But when we walked out into the streets, they lagged behind. So I asked them why they weren't joining us in the street. They replied that they would join us after we went out first. Then a colleague shouted: where are the men? Here are the women! This irritated many men. But they laughed. The word spread and the women continued to repeat this refrain.*⁹³⁶

After four days the strikers were victorious, gaining a 45-day bonus and a promise that the factory would not be privatized. Because the union committee delegates had attempted to thwart the strike,⁹³⁷ the organic workers' leaders demanded their resignation from the General Union of Textile Workers and fair trade union elections. Almost 13,000⁹³⁸ workers from Mahalla signed the petition. When their request was ignored, some 6,000 workers quit from the GFETU.⁹³⁹

In the last week of September 2007 the workers of Mahalla went on strike anew, demanding a further increase of their bonuses and food allowances, a rise of the minimum wage to 1,200 EGP, and the resignation of the management – and they were victorious.⁹⁴⁰ As the strike was organized in Ramadan, the workers stayed in the factory and people brought them food in the afternoon.⁹⁴¹ Drawing on the experience of December 2006, workers occupied the factory and established their own security force to protect the factory from a lock-out. They organized committees responsible for security and health issues, along with food provision for the strikers. Worker leader Muhammad al-Attar recollected that the mode of the strike had changed from a simple protest at the factory gate to a protracted struggle with factory management and the security forces: *"We set up tents and proved to the government that we could hold to our cause longer than they*

⁹³⁵ Beinín and al-Hamalawy 2007a.

⁹³⁶ In Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹³⁷ They were perceived as illegitimate, because of massive fraud and the exclusion of candidates during the trade union elections of 2006. (Mackell 2012b: 23)

⁹³⁸ Some 15,000 workers or 60 percent of the Mahalla workforce, according to Kamal al-Fayumi. (Ibid.)

⁹³⁹ Beinín and al-Hamalawy 2007a.

⁹⁴⁰ Mackell 2012b: 23.

⁹⁴¹ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

could to theirs."⁹⁴² Much of the organization of the strike was now coordinated by Kamal Fayumi and Sayyid Habib of the Textile Workers' League, an independent trade union committee that had played a secondary role in the previous strike and which was close to the RS.⁹⁴³ The strike lasted for six days and ended in victory for the Mahalla workers who gained a two-month bonus along with extra bonuses in January and June 2008 and January 2009. Additionally, they succeeded in impeaching the trade union leaders who were too close to the regime, and in reducing factory debt by one billion EGP.⁹⁴⁴

The strike spirit also got a hold over workers in various other sectors and governorates, such as the cement industry in Tura and Helwan, Cairo subway drivers, bakers, and so on.⁹⁴⁵ In contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, the strikes were not restricted to public sector employees, but also encouraged workers in private companies, such as Arab Polvara Spinning and Weaving in Alexandria, to struggle for their rights.⁹⁴⁶

In February 2008, once more, some 20,000 workers and citizens took the streets of Mahalla. The factory had claimed a loss of 45 million EGP, despite a capital injection of 450 million EGP. Amal al-Said angrily recalled that *"It was a joke. We needed to protest... We wanted to know the reason for the loss."*⁹⁴⁷ The February demonstration was jointly organized by worker leaders such as Kamal Fayumi and Sayyid Habib and political activists from the New Left tendencies. The protesters demanded a national minimum wage, improved living conditions, and also raised political slogans against the President and his son.⁹⁴⁸

Insurrection

On 6 April 2008, leftist worker leaders and activists planned a new strike. Some political groups, bloggers and intellectuals seized the event to call for a political "general strike" against the regime, without, however, organizing anything on the ground. Sayyid Habib recalled that:

⁹⁴² In Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹⁴³ Conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009.

⁹⁴⁴ Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹⁴⁵ Beinín and al-Hamalawy, 2007a; Interview with Muhammad Abd al-Azim, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

⁹⁴⁶ Beinín 2009a: 38-9.

⁹⁴⁷ In Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

⁹⁴⁸ al-Hamalawy 2008.

We invited all workers for the strike on 6 April, but some Islamic and political trends invited the people to make a general strike on this day. The biggest mistake was that they called people for strikes and they could not organize the people. In Ghazl al-Mahalla we decided to stop our strike. When people outside the factory made an action we participated as people and not as workers. So it was a big mistake that political trends called the people to make a strike and at the same time not organizing the people.⁹⁴⁹

The Mahalla movement was not ready for such a counter-hegemonic undertaking. The regime, for its part, was well prepared for the confrontation. Six days before the strike, worker leaders were intimidated by GFETU chairman Husayn Megawer to stop their preparations or be arrested.⁹⁵⁰ Four days later, plainclothes policemen were called into the police station of Mahalla: they were given walkie-talkies and instructions for wrecking havoc in the city.⁹⁵¹ The security forces acted with a pre-emptive lock-out, arriving in the factory before the first workers and taking over the machines.⁹⁵² According to Ahmed Belal, an activist of *Tagammu* and a resident of Mahalla:

...the violence started after Haisam al-Shami, a policeman, beat an old woman. People became angry, began to fight and threw stones at the hated Central Security troops, who retaliated with tear gas. For two days Mahalla became the arena of a violent clash between police and citizens. Three youths were killed and shops, houses, hospitals and schools were destroyed.⁹⁵³

The combination of repression and co-optation – the regime pledged to accede to some of the workers' demands – put pressure on the strike committee to cancel the strike. In the end, Mahalla workers and their families participated in street protests as citizens, shifting their demands to the high price of bread.⁹⁵⁴ They were met by violence and the insurrection was quelled. While there were 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.⁹⁵⁵ Faysal Lakusha bitterly remembered that: "When Mahalla citizens had their

⁹⁴⁹ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

⁹⁵⁰ Mackell 2012b: 25.

⁹⁵¹ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 6 April 2009.

⁹⁵² al-Hamalawy 2008.

⁹⁵³ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 6 April 2009.

⁹⁵⁴ Beinín 2011a: 199.

⁹⁵⁵ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

demonstrations on 6 April, no one in the country had a strike, no one supported them, no village or town had a strike."⁹⁵⁶

After the botched revolt the Mahalla movement disintegrated. Whilst there was much talk of the necessity of creating an independent trade union, this neoformation did not develop beyond the level of the strike committee. Concessions from factory management and the threat of State repression divided the leaders and rank-and-file workers of Ghazl al-Mahalla over the further development of their movement.⁹⁵⁷ Fatma Ramadan explained that:

*The violence of 6 April only lasted for a few days, five or six, and after this the movement rose again. A lot of strikes happened. So it wasn't the violence that made the workers afraid, but it made them more organized and it gave them the knowledge of how the government would react. But the government and the labor union created new pressures through firing the workers, especially the leaders. The workers saw the leaders who were in the streets and were fired now and who don't have money or food and they think twice before they join a strike. That's the new system. In addition: the economic crisis had an impact on the labor movement.*⁹⁵⁸

Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq summarized the causes of the failure of the Mahalla movement after 6 April as follows:

There are a lot of reasons, most of them related to organization and consciousness. The main issue for the political organizations which were active in Mahalla in 2006 was how to win a lot of members from this movement. However, the movement itself needed a lot of organization and development. About the leadership... there were problems from two sides: on the one hand, from the political forces which discovered these leaders, and on the other, from the leaders themselves who didn't create substitution leaders. After the destruction of these leaders – because of the security or because of themselves, because they love to be famous – there was a gap between them and the base of the workers' movement. The leadership was destroyed by transferring them to other companies, by early retirement and by making them famous; they became like superstars and this made the public and base workers not trust them. For example, in one of the fights, three of the workers leaders were invited to a conference in the Journalist Syndicate. And I said: "it's not logical, you are supposed to be in your power base and the media must come to you and not the other way around", but because of the influence of the political forces and their "superstar" aims, they gave the security and the

⁹⁵⁶ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁹⁵⁷ Beinin 2011a: 200.

⁹⁵⁸ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

administration the opportunity to create an image of these leaders, that these leaders are not defending the workers' demands, that they are becoming superstars and only defending their own personal interests.

There is a third reason. The political forces which emerged on 6 April transformed the strike into a "superstar" action, making the state and the government extra careful for the movement. No one imagined that the government could be so smart and use violence in such a subtle way. The security went to every place where the strike was and they finished the strikes. The way to do it was to say to the workers that the political forces would not support them, but that they need the workers and will use them and control them in order to become famous and so on. Then there is the violence which the workers in Mahalla and the strike members face up until now.

The Prime Minister came to Mahalla – Nazif came to Mahalla and agreed to all the workers demands. One of the labor demands, and they thought it was not possible, was firing the management, and it happened. Nazif realized it for them. The management was officially investigated and that was for the workers a big victory. Especially because they thought it was a near impossible aim. And it was possible for the government to convince a lot of the workers, by their deeds, by money, and so on... The end of the strike was because of the lack of organization and the attempts of the political powers to control it and to use it and not to support it. The leaders of the strikes when they did not make any substitution leaders and the power of the state were the reasons of the failure.⁹⁵⁹

With the defeat of the Mahalla workers the whole proletarian movement lost its center and its vanguard. However, the Mahalla protests had initiated a new wave of workers' actions that did not simply subside after 6 April, but it continued to engulf other workplaces and sectors, stimulating new demands and organizational shapes. The directive center that the Mahalla workers had become was replaced with the central demand of the minimum wage, which, at least symbolically, united the Egyptian working class. Moreover, the movement found a new model for struggle and organization in the form of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU), which inspired, even before the 25 January Revolution, other movements to create their own independent trade unions.

⁹⁵⁹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

CHAPTER 15

Development of the Strike

But the workers' movement teaches itself. This is what happened in Mahalla. It is a role model for the workers: how they became strong, how their protests developed, and how they learned and built their own road.

Hisham Fouad, SLCHR and RS leader, Interview, Giza, 26 October 2010

Growing Systematicity

As I have discussed in previous chapters, during the era of the moral economy worker actions were guided by a subaltern Subjectivity of support for the State-led nationalist project. Workers rarely went on strike, in the classic sense of a protracted work stoppage, but instead stayed at the workplace after hours, reinforcing their symbolic position of fidelity within the patronage system.⁹⁶⁰ In fact, production often increased during these episodes, and it was the State that cut off electricity, water, or gas to halt the “work-in”. In general, these protests: *“...lasted less than 24 hours... The very short duration of protests curtailed opportunities for the movement to develop workers' consciousness and organisation, as well as preventing them from triggering a solidarity movement or copycat strikes in other workplaces.”*⁹⁶¹

However, because of the neoliberal breakdown of corporatist patron-client relations, the “work-in” tactic had become an anachronism. Neither the management nor the government was interested in working class displays of loyalty. Labor leader Sabr Barakat summarized that:

*In the beginning of the work of the labor movement, the movement was infected by the paternalist control of the government: the Abd al-Nasser state was a state which gave us social rights but stopped our freedom. After this came Sadat, who stopped our social rights AND our freedom. Then came Mubarak, who introduced us to global capitalism.*⁹⁶²

The Mahalla strike of December 2006 started as an activity with a simple and spontaneous mode of action – protests in front of the factory gates – and a

⁹⁶⁰ Al-Mahdi 2009.

⁹⁶¹ Bassiouny and Omar 2007.

⁹⁶² Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

straightforward objective: obtaining the promised bonus. The work-stoppage that lasted for three days necessitated the development of new directive, technical, and discursive competences to cope with the realities of a protracted strike.⁹⁶³ Alexander elucidated that:

Strikes lasted longer, sometimes for a week or more, and thus demanded a greater and more sustained organisational commitment than disputes that were either quickly settled or crushed by the security forces. A tactical shift by the authorities who attempted to deal with most strikes by negotiation, rather than direct repression, was also highly significant as directly elected negotiators were able to gain valuable experience in representing striking workers' interests to the employers and the state.⁹⁶⁴

The strike activity produced its own neoformations: fresh organic intellectuals – leaders, organizers, spokesmen, writers, singers, cartoonists, et cetera; and relatively stable networks and centers to direct and organize the worker actions. As the labor representatives of the GFETU were maneuvering against the strike, a spontaneous strike committee was leading the workers' struggle.⁹⁶⁵ The factory had to be occupied by workers in order to prevent security forces of taking over the premises and continuing production.

When occupation became the leading activity of the 2007 strike, it expanded and deepened the activity-system. The occupying workers needed food, shelter and protection, which stimulated the formation of new committees responsible for these functions.⁹⁶⁶ Demonstrations and solidarity actions were organized outside the space of the factory to obtain the practical and moral support from the whole community. As a city of working class families, Mahalla al-Kubra participated spontaneously into the proletarian activity-system of the strike, thereby “proletarianizing” the Subjectivities of its citizens. The contingent chain of strike actions had become a coherent **system** of activity with its own logic.

Interiorization

Ironically, the success of the activity-system that sprang from the strike actions was a brake on its direct development. When the workers achieved their

⁹⁶³ Bassiouny and Omar 2007; Al-Mahdi 2009.

⁹⁶⁴ Alexander 2012.

⁹⁶⁵ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

⁹⁶⁶ Bassiouny and Omar 2007.

demands after four or five days of strike, their strike activity and its objectifications obviously came to a halt. However, the objectified strike activity had been **interiorized** back into the fledgling worker Subject. Firstly, victory reinforced the workers' consciousness that it had been their will and agency as collectively organized striking workers which 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 their experiences from the previous year to the current strike and take the development of the system of activity to the next level. The activity-system had continued its life-process as a developing Concept in the memories, thoughts and discussions of the workers. Thirdly, strike objectifications such as committees, mass meetings, sit-ins and "tent-cities" had stimulated practices of collective debate and decision making, and were interiorized as democratic traditions into the workers' movement, stimulating its Subjectness.⁹⁶⁷ The strike activity had developed both the organization and the consciousness of the workers and even though the process of its institutionalization – its grounding in more or less stable structures – was, after each strike, temporarily halted, it was interiorized in the consciousness and habits of the workers.

Interiorization also entailed a transformation of the original "direct" and "economic" objective of the strike in accordance with the dynamic of the activity-system. The strike was initiated because of an object external to the activity of striking, but from its own life-process emerged new goals and aims. Whereas the strike was first an instrument to defend the livelihoods of the Mahalla workers, it developed its own immanent rationale and goal: it became a Project. The development of the Subjectness of the workers – the consciousness of themselves as a social Subject – developed in line with the formation of a concept of their predicament. The workers' critique of their predicament was expanded and deepened throughout their strikes. A "basic" economic struggle for livelihoods developed into a "higher" conflict for national labor rights, and even into a fight against *al-nizam*:⁹⁶⁸ the "regime" or "system". There was a clear "vertical"

⁹⁶⁷ Alexander, 2010.

⁹⁶⁸ See *Chapter 20 Reason in Revolt*.

development from economic-corporate and particularist practices and forms of consciousness to a trade unionist and even political Subjectivity. The first obstacle on the road to the workers' demands, the factory's management, was followed by the GFETU – which sabotaged their capacity to strike – by the security apparatus that repressed them, and by the political regime that had initiated the “neoliberal” economic reforms in the first place. The “good sense” by the Mahalla workers of their predicament developed from a simple *criticism* of the corruption of the *particular* factory management towards a political-economic *critique* of the *general* authoritarian and capitalist nature of *al-nizam*. More and more workers saw the GFETU, the State, and the president no longer as guardians and patrons in a moral economy, but as class enemies.⁹⁶⁹ During the 6 April insurrection in Mahalla, posters of Mubarak were torn apart by jubilant youth.⁹⁷⁰ This episode expressed the growing connection which was made in thought between particular forms of economic exploitation and the general political domination of the Mubarak regime.⁹⁷¹ The politicization of the strike movement worried the regime, which explains its willingness to grant concessions to the workers. An attack on the undemocratic GFETU, which traditionally mobilized the workers in pro-government rallies and elections, was perceived as a challenge towards the authoritarian regime itself.⁹⁷²

Projection

The immanent goals and objectifications of the strike activity-system were not only interiorized back into the Mahalla worker Subject, but also saliently projected “outside” the movement. Firstly, this projection was an invitation for other workers and non-proletarian groups to participate in the strike activity-system in a solidary way. In its development from an economic-corporate condition to trade unionism, the working class not only has to overcome its “vertical” disorganization in particular workplaces, but also its “horizontal” atomization in different spatio-temporal instances of struggle. Spontaneous actions in solidarity with the Mahalla workers imagined a proletarian unity that was not yet institutionalized. Sayyid Habib recalled that: “...*the workers at Kafr ad-*

⁹⁶⁹ al-Mahdi 2009.

⁹⁷⁰ Clément, 2011: 73.

⁹⁷¹ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

⁹⁷² Beinin 2007.

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."⁹⁷³ Suez labor leader Saud Omar remembered that: *"We supported the Mahalla workers by statements and by organizing protests in Cairo in front of the GFETU or parliament."*⁹⁷⁴ In this manner, the spatio-temporal particularity of the Mahalla strike was overcome through its continuous reenactment by other worker activity-systems. As I discuss in the next chapter, because of its salient victories, the Mahalla strikes also interpellated forms of assistance from "traditional intellectuals".

Secondly, the Mahalla strikes projected the ability for Egyptian workers *in general* to solve their economic predicament through a specific type of collective action. Veteran worker leader Talal Shukr explained that:

*Well, the movement of the workers exists since 1976, it is a continuous movement and has not stopped since then. But in December 2006, the workers of Ghazl al-Mahalla made a great movement. They demanded a salary raise. Other workers gained hope through the Mahalla workers' victory and struck as well. They advanced the same demands: a good salary, decrease in the cost of education, etc. A good salary is necessary: it's a means to lead a decent life. In addition, the strike was an important learning experience: it showed the workers the power of a strike as an instrument.*⁹⁷⁵

Mahalla was not only the barometer of the Egyptian class struggle, passively indicating the low and high tides of the workers' movement, but it also actively taught other workplaces about the power of strike action. The projection of the Mahalla strikes was heteroleptic, in the sense that it showed other instances of the workers' movement a more advanced stage of their own activity-system-in-development. It was this heteroleptic instruction that stimulated 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 activity-system.⁹⁷⁶ *"Ghazl al-Mahalla taught a lot of different people how to strike, e.g. teachers, doctors. When our workers get their bonus and salary, all the workers benefit from it."*⁹⁷⁷ *"When others saw*

⁹⁷³ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

⁹⁷⁴ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

⁹⁷⁵ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

⁹⁷⁶ Bassiouny and Omar 2007.

⁹⁷⁷ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

*this experience they made their own strikes. The consciousness started from Mahalla,*⁹⁷⁸ asserted Faysal Lakusha. The Mahalla workers became instructors of other workers, who used similar methods to get the same results.

Thirdly, the development of the organization and demands of the Mahalla workers imagined the existence of independent trade unionism, even though its structures and networks did not yet exist. In practice the Mahalla activity-system was *"...already operating as an independent trade union"*.⁹⁷⁹ The autoproleptic activities of the strikers projected themselves in a more advanced stage of Subjectness. Slowly the performance of independent worker activism and its objectifications – which were originally born out of necessity to mediate the new "neoliberal" relations between workers, factory management and the State – were interiorized as a trade unionist and even political Subjectivity among the Mahalla workers. By sharing strike experiences and organizational and discursive forms, the development which the Mahalla workers made within their own activity-system became co-present in the life of many workers, even though the class was still far from being centrally organized on a national level.

Fourthly, the development of the Mahalla activity-system anticipated the workers as a social Subject capable of formulating a political alternative to the reality of the Mubarak regime. 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. Hisham Fouad, a leader in the Revolutionary Socialists and the Sons of Land Center for Human Rights (SLCHR) presented the working class as a Subject which is capable of realizing civil rights and political democracy:

The workers' movement is a democratic power itself... When workers organize a demonstration in Cairo, they have to occupy the streets and arrange transport for their comrades. When they want to negotiate with the Minister, they have to elect delegates from the different governorates. This is an example of workers' democracy.

⁹⁷⁸ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁹⁷⁹ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

*Those who talk about democracy and who advance democratic demands cannot accomplish any of these demands, but the workers accomplish these demands without using any political slogan.*⁹⁸⁰

Alexander explained that:

*Egyptian workers took by storm the same rights which other “political” campaigns for democracy had been forced to abandon under pressure from the state: the right to assembly, the right to protest, to free speech. The strike wave carved out spaces for discussion and organization in thousands of workplaces across the country, driving the struggle deep into the fabric of Egyptian society.*⁹⁸¹

The Defeat of Mahalla

Between 2006 and 2008 the Mahalla workers constituted the vanguard of the Egyptian workers’ movement, instructing and pushing the vertical and horizontal development of the worker Subject forward. Even though there was no direct organizational connection between the different collective actions, the same scenario was often repeated, revealing the logic of class struggle. However, at the same time there was an unevenness in the development of class consciousness and in the radicalism of the demands. Whilst strikers in Mahalla, Kafr al-Dawwar, and Shibin al-Kum turned against their official trade union representatives, other workers were more cautious towards the GFETU – even when their syndical officials were obstructing their actions.⁹⁸² Faysal Lakusha remembered that it was difficult to overcome the *ad hoc* character of solidarity and coordination in this period: “We started to coordinate, e.g. in Kafr al-Dawwar. The coordination was not so good, however. They moved after us, not with us. We have to make additional efforts to make them move with us and to coordinate the struggle.”⁹⁸³

The February 2008 demonstration expressed the high point of the Mahalla movement, but afterwards the workers’ leaders were divided over the direction of the movement. Some actors advocated a deepening of the political aspect of the strikes, while others recommended caution and moderation. In addition, the State, both on the level of factory management and state security, tried to undermine the organization of the workers by separating and alienating the

⁹⁸⁰ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

⁹⁸¹ Alexander 2011.

⁹⁸² Beinín and al-Hamalawy 2007a.

⁹⁸³ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

organic leadership from its rank-and-file. Mahalla strike leaders were detained, put on early retirement or transferred to other factories.⁹⁸⁴ Prominent workers who were given a platform in the national media were accused of opportunism and “stardom”.

The Mahalla strike committees had been the seed of independent trade unionism, but the 6 April 2008 strike fiasco cut right through its developmental trajectory. Yet, even though the Mahalla workers were no longer able to play a vanguard role between 2008 and 2010,⁹⁸⁵ the prolepsis of their strike activity had set in motion processes of development towards trade unionism in other workplaces. Inas Safti of the Forum for Women in Development claimed that:

There are strikes happening everywhere. There are other factories like Qenawi factories, there are groups of workers going on strike for days and days... The Mahalla workers are not aware of this, they are not conscious. The thing is that because they lack political consciousness they don't understand that you shouldn't measure [the struggle] by how many rights you have attained, but... by the fact that the protests are going all over the sectors. And [the real question is] how these small strikes and groups of protestors can interact and collaborate and work cooperatively to build and to organize the labor movement again.⁹⁸⁶

Sabr Barakat explained that:

The movement grows more than in the past. Maybe the shape and the image is not bigger, but they are having a big success and a deep impact. And they are creating a new dynamic for the Egyptian working class. And they are pushing the consciousness to new areas where the old labor movement experience never penetrated. Because there were areas that were closed and where the old labor movement did not reach. Now they are connecting their struggle. They know that organizing themselves will make the situation better and that a connection with the old experience of the labor movement will push them more towards a national activity of the workers.⁹⁸⁷

Although the Egyptian working class was still far from being centrally organized on a national level, the Strike became co-present in the lifeworld of many workers. By sharing strike experiences, methods, organizational and discursive

⁹⁸⁴ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁹⁸⁵ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

⁹⁸⁶ Interview with Inas Safti, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

⁹⁸⁷ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

forms, aims and demands, workers constituted a joint yet decentralized proletarian activity-system, oriented towards the shared object of defending basic livelihoods. The movement had to develop the necessary neoformations such as a trade union apparatus, shared demands, and a directive center in order to unite the various workers' activity-systems, not only in thought, but also in practice.

Towards Independent Trade unionism

The Real Estate Tax Authority Union

After 2008 the development of the workers' movement was pushed forward organizationally by the formation and consolidation of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU) and unions of teachers, health technicians and pensioners; and discursively by the formulation of the demand of an equitable national minimum wage. Whereas the Mahalla strikes had shown workers it was possible to achieve their demands through collective struggle and organization; the successful strike of the tax workers and the establishment of the RETAU demonstrated how an effective trade union leadership and apparatus could and should be built. Kamal Abu al-Eita, leader of the RETAU, recapitulated their experience:

For us as the tax syndicate, we were the first to organize strike committees in the whole country. When we had achieved all our demands, we doubled our wages from 340 EGP. We changed our leadership, the state union; and the Ministry of Finance, through the strike. We were allowed to have reforms. After we won our own demands, we came to another stage in our democratic struggle. We have organized a public and independent trade union containing 30 committees in the whole country. It was by agreement of all strike committees in the whole country. A successful strike brings a successful independent trade union. Using our own trade unions and in the negotiations we succeeded in doubling our wages. And in July we'll achieve another doubling of wages. We have already organized a new fund for the social care in the trade union to give workers a pension. It costs 1.5 million.⁹⁸⁸

Kamal Abu al-Eita's story revealed the immanence of the worker Subject through the spontaneous strike activity. Just as the Mahalla strikers, the tax workers began by contesting a purely economic demand. The experience of the strike elucidated

⁹⁸⁸ Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011.

both the main obstacle for the workers, the State syndicate, and its solution, the independent trade union. When the tax workers began their strike they had no idea that they would be the first since 1952 to establish an independent trade union. However, from the dynamic of the conflict followed that, if they wanted to be successful, they had to organize and systematize their activity. The Mahalla workers had failed to do so successfully, and they had been defeated.

Among Mahalla workers the victory of the RETAU was received with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they applauded the successes of their comrades in advancing their activity-system to a level that they had not yet reached themselves, but, on the other, the creation of the RETAU glaringly confronted them with their current inability to develop their own movement. A common idea among some labor activists was that the regime had “allowed” the independent RETAU, because it was situated at the periphery of the workers’ movement and did not directly threaten the GFETU as a pillar of the system. For example, Abdul Kader, a Mahalla worker, claimed that the RETAU “...took our example, but they already succeeded. Kamal Abu al-Eita, their leader openly admits this. The government knows that if the workers of Mahalla succeed in setting up an independent union, the GFETU will collapse.”⁹⁸⁹ Even veteran worker leader Talal Shukr was skeptical about the RETAU victory:

*The tax collectors of buildings have developed an independent union. The ILO supports it. This is the first time since 1952 that there’s an independent union. It sets an example for other movements. At the same time it’s only a show, an illusion of liberty. The government allows this union to deceive the ILO.*⁹⁹⁰

However, labor journalist Siham Shewada stressed that the reason of the failure of the Mahalla strike movement and of the success of the RETAU was determined by their ability to develop a stable leadership:

After the strike of 2008 in Ghazl al-Mahalla they didn’t have any labor activity anymore. The reason was that there wasn’t a real worker leadership there, despite what the media was telling us. In 2008 the state union leadership started to kick out the active worker leaders in Mahalla and transferred them to Cairo and Alexandria, and it was as if they killed them slowly. If there was a real leadership, the factory would have made a strike to support those who have been kicked out. If

⁹⁸⁹ Interview with Abdul Kader, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

⁹⁹⁰ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

they were a real leadership, there would have been strikes in solidarity with them. So they were not real leaders. ⁹⁹¹

Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq agreed:

After the Mahalla strike was finished, because of the bad organization there was no group able to speak for Mahalla, and this was different for the tax workers' strike. A lot of political organizations, especially the leftists, asked the Mahalla workers to make a substitution union, but it was so obvious that they were thinking that they would play the role of organizing the workers and creating new actions. And I think this was a bad idea of the parties. In addition, the government and political organizations started to work against the substitution leaders. ⁹⁹²

CTUWS director Kamal Abbas was of the same mind: *"The ideal example for the independent union was the struggle of the real estate tax workers and of the pensioners: they had a conscious and political leadership which was able to take good decisions and prepare for strategies and tactics."* ⁹⁹³

Seeds of a Trade union Federation

The RETAU was followed by the pensioners' union in 2008, an initiative of Tagammu MP al-Badry Farghaly. ⁹⁹⁴ With regard to the health technicians union, comprising all workers who graduated from the Health Technical Institute – such as anesthetist assistants, laboratory and machine technicians, et cetera – its leader Ahmed al-Sayyid recalled that:

We announced the trade union by the end of 2009... We didn't make any strikes because our job is very sensitive. We started maybe in a café, at someone's place, with some friends; we were delaying to start it formally. Then we noticed that our numbers increased, because the alternative was the state syndicate. With this amount of numbers we met Kamal Abu al-Eita. We learned from him how to set up a good trade union. Kamal Abu al-Eita started his trade union with a strike, but we took the decision to first set up our organization, gather a lot of members, announce our demands, and only then, when we did not get our demands, we should organize a strike. We organized a weekly meeting for the Cairo members, on Saturday and on Thursday, and a monthly meeting of all the members in the branches. Each month we went to the different governorates to spread our ideas, each first Friday of the month. We went to all the governorates of the country but

⁹⁹¹ Interview with Siham Shewada, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

⁹⁹² Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

⁹⁹³ Interview with Kamal Abbas, Cairo, 27 March 2011.

⁹⁹⁴ Interview with al-Badry Farghaly, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

we had a slow reaction, answer because people were afraid of the repression of the government. The old state trade unions formed an obstacle for us because people thought that we would steal from them, like the syndicates used to do in Egypt. For a whole year we didn't take any fees from any member, we just invited people to join us and we were convinced that whomever we won in a governorate, city or village, that those people would be really engaged to become members in the trade union. Not asking for fees in the beginning was a good tactic because it showed that we were not after the people's money. During these trips and journeys we took a lawyer with us who knows the legal details about the law for syndicates in Egypt. Even I studied the law myself just to know about my rights. In addition to educate the people in their lost rights, we also encouraged them to be more active in their state unions, especially in the regions of Upper Egypt, because of their low wages. Despite these problems and atmosphere we succeeded in making our first trade union meeting and created the trade union to discuss the internal constitution and organization of the union. All of us lost our jobs because of this struggle. In addition to the police repression. We held a main conference in the journalists' syndicate with the help of Kamal Abu Eita, and we announced the creation of the trade union. We tried to announce the union to the Ministry of Manpower and all other Ministries, but they refused to accept our documents. So we took the other legal way by sending the documents to the court.⁹⁹⁵

Ahmed al-Sayyid's narration elucidated that the role of the RETAU in the take-off of the Egyptian independent trade union movement was not merely "leading by example", but the creation of a shared, solidary activity-system whereby leaders such as Kamal Abu al-Eita helped in the practical organization of new trade unions. Just as the Mahalla strike committees were already informally operating as a trade union, the cooperation between the four independent trade unions anticipated the formation of a national federation of independent trade unions, which was realized after the fall of Mubarak.

The Teachers

The teachers, for their part, had been involved in struggles since 2005. After fifteen years of work, teachers still only earned 600 EGP and had to obtain extra income through private lessons, as Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, a teacher in Giza and *Tagammu* activist, clarified:

⁹⁹⁵ Interview with Ahmed al-Sayyid, Cairo, 23 March 2011.

Families in Egypt spend 30 percent of their income on education. They look on teachers as greedy people. Our real private salary comes from the people in private classes. Once we have a higher salary, we'll stop our private classes. ⁹⁹⁶

Mubarak had promised them better working conditions and salaries, but instead a law was implemented which paved the way for the liberalization and privatization of the school system, under the guise of safeguarding the quality of education. In addition, teachers challenged their own societal position as loyal pillars of State power. Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim claimed that:

The government turns the teacher into a policeman. The books serve to keep the pupils quiet. Don't discuss, don't ask! We are the first police officers in society. We kill their ideas and deliver them to the government to take their freedom away. ⁹⁹⁷

Abd al-Hafiz, an English teacher and *Tagammu* activist, stressed that the regime: "...depended mainly on the fact that an ignorant people is easy to lead. So they just tried to turn schools into a tool to rule the society." ⁹⁹⁸ The school was a reflection of the authoritarian society with practices of direct control and supervision: "Every school had a spy. Every administration has someone who is the contact with the state security... They make the students to file reports on the teachers. And the teachers against the students and against each others..." ⁹⁹⁹ Because the Egyptian education system was an important space for the social and political reproduction of *al-nizam*, the "economic" protests of teachers' often included a component of anti-authoritarianism, especially when they created solidary activity-systems with the students' movements. ¹⁰⁰⁰

Activists such as Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim in Giza created committees to defend the teachers' rights. From 2006 on Abd al-Hafiz began to take unpaid vacations and he established the Egyptian Center for Educational Rights, an NGO which contested the new law and defended the rights of teachers. ¹⁰⁰¹ The teachers' movements were scattered and needed a central point for coordinating their

⁹⁹⁶ Interview with Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, Cairo, 22 May 2009.

⁹⁹⁷ Ibidem.

⁹⁹⁸ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

⁹⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011; Interview with Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, Cairo, 22 May 2009.

¹⁰⁰¹ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

actions and demonstrations.¹⁰⁰² Abd al-Hafiz recalled how he had to start from scratch in organizing the teachers' protest:

*...I started it with a statement, I published it and I signed it with the teachers' association in Cairo, in al-Arish, in Giza, in Alexandria, in Munufiya. But there was nothing. Then some teachers from al-Arish telephoned the newspaper, and asked for my number, and they told me: "we would like to join the teachers' organization in al-Arish". I said ok. I have a friend in al-Arish so I called him "Ashraf, how are you, you are responsible for the work in al-Arish" and so it started. It started with small groups, then bigger groups, and then came the idea of a trade union.*¹⁰⁰³

Even though a lot of teachers agreed with the necessity to contest neoliberal reform in the domain of education, not everyone was of the opinion that an independent trade union would be the best method in achieving their goal. One group of teachers emphasized that they could and would only try to reform the existing State teachers' syndicate. Another group, chiefly consisting of Muslim Brother members and sympathizers claimed that they first had to see if there was a possibility to reform and change the teachers' syndicate from inside. If not, they could still leave the syndicate and set up their own trade union. A smaller faction, led by Abd al-Hafiz, however, decided to build an independent trade union, on a class instead of corporatist basis: *"we are going to build a trade union for the teachers as workers, as paid wage-workers."*¹⁰⁰⁴

The development of the trade union went faster than originally planned, pushed forward by increased exploitation by the Ministry of Education:

*We had three to four thousand members. We planned to announce our union by the end of 2011 this year. But accidentally it happened that seven teachers died, one per day during the secondary school examinations. It was because the Minister of Education decided to double the work hours and to give them no chance to get sick leaves. So those who suffered from bad diseases just started to die. So we decided to announce our call for a trade union as a reaction. This was on 14 July 2010. And of course every day we have new members. We are getting stronger and stronger. We made our own constitution. We will have elections within two months.*¹⁰⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰² Interview with Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, Cairo, 22 May 2009.

¹⁰⁰³ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

The 25 January Revolution would accelerate the maturation of the teachers' protest movements and organizations into fully-developed independent trade unions. In the fall of 2011 the general teachers' strike became one of the biggest coordinated strikes in Egyptian history.

The Nurses

There were, of course, many other workers' movements before the 25 January Revolution that did not yet fully develop into trade unions:¹⁰⁰⁶ for example, the Voice of the Nurses Movement. Nurses in State-run hospitals suffered from very low wages and appalling working conditions. Sayyida al-Sayyid Muhammad, a nurse and RS member made clear that: "...they work twelve hours, they have one pound and 25 piasters each shift for the twelve hours in university hospitals like al-Qasr al-Aini... They deduct taxes from our wages even if the shifts are like twelve hours through the night."¹⁰⁰⁷ However, in organizing the defense of the interests of its members, the movement had to overcome some particular and peculiar obstacles. Firstly, in Egypt, nurses were treated as social pariahs. Inas Safti explicated that:

*...the nurses sector in Egypt is extremely prejudiced against and they are extremely underprivileged. Because socially it is looked down upon, it is really perceived in a negative way socially. It's very degrading to women nurses and for very awkward reasons that does not apply to female doctors or surgeons. Nurses work late at night and that's why they are perceived in a bad way socially... but the same applies to doctors or surgeons and they are not frowned upon.*¹⁰⁰⁸

Secondly, the nurses were scattered over three State unions. Most nurses were affiliated to the general union for nurses, but nurses who worked in universities were members of the Union of Education and Scientific research, and nurses related to the Ministry of Health were part of the Union of Health Services.¹⁰⁰⁹ Thirdly, nurses were spread over many different hospitals which were isolated from one another and there was much variance in working conditions between hospitals.¹⁰¹⁰ Fourthly, there were contradictions between the Ministry of Health which promised the nurses an increase in their salary, and the Ministry of

¹⁰⁰⁶ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Interview with Sayyida al-Sayyid Muhammad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Interview with Inas Safti, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Interview with Sayyida al-Sayyid Muhammad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid.

Finance, which cancelled the decision, sowing confusion among the nurses if they would obtain a pay rise or not.¹⁰¹¹

Yet, nurses were quite militant and achieved some victories in the past years:

*There was a strike in Tanta: we made a strike because of the meals. We didn't receive meals or even money in order to get food as a meal... Then they gave us only eight pounds per month. So we told them "no! Take your money and we will take the food". Because the meal actually costs more than eight pounds. So if I work in the hospital and I am hungry, eight pounds will get me nothing... We negotiated that we could take a hot meal during our work at night... According to the ministry we get two uniforms per year, shoes, and a veil, but we get nothing at Tanta. They only gave us 50 pounds. So we negotiated to get uniforms instead of the money. This is better. The value and cost of the uniform is getting higher, so we want the uniform instead of the money... There was also a hospital at Qasr al-Shibeen. Normally they would get a 125% bonus as a motivation for them added to their basic salary... The management didn't want to give it to them, also not in Beni Suef, in Cairo, in any place, from Alexandria to Aswan...*¹⁰¹²

The resistance of the State unions against the strikes and actions of the independent nurses' movement forced the nurses to develop their own forms of organization and coordination. From January 2010 onwards, activists tried to overcome the fragmentation of the nurses, contacting spontaneous strike leaders, and coordinating the various instances of struggle.

The workplaces who went on strike got their money. Those who didn't make their strike got nothing. And those who didn't communicate with us didn't get anything...

*The nurses of Qasr al-Shibeen influenced other nurses: there was a strike in Tanta and Cairo University... We explained it and took the picture to our colleagues so they made strikes in order to take their rights. After this strike there was a period of strikes in many places. In the beginning of June or July. There were five strikes in one day: Ismailiyya, two places in Cairo, Benha, Minya. There were also strikes in Beni Suef... There were strikes in many places. And thank God they were able to take a part of their rights, not yet all of them, but they will ask again for the rest of their rights.*¹⁰¹³

¹⁰¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁰¹² Ibid.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid.

The strike movement also opened up possibilities for the social position of the nurses:

*The nurses movement does not only represent a good example of organized labor, it is not only a role model for workers, it is also taking the role of defending this sector and defending their image and presenting a better image of nurses because they are always looked down upon.*¹⁰¹⁴

On 19 July 2010, the nurses' movement held its first conference in the Journalists' Syndicate, moving towards the formation of an independent trade union.

Striking Before Parliament

Apart from the organizational development of four independent trade unions, since 2009 workers also 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 sit-ins 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. Two main demands emerged from the contemporaneous sit-ins: a fair minimum wage and expanded rights for the temporarily employed.¹⁰¹⁵

To conclude: before the 25 January Revolution there was already an independent trade union movement in Egypt. The salient and successful Mahalla strikes had given workers the preferable method, the confidence and the consciousness to use collective struggle – the Strike – as a means to overcome their economic-corporate predicament. The victory of the tax workers and the establishment of the RETAU granted workers a concrete model of institutionalizing their spontaneous activity-system into a trade unionist shape. The demand for a fair national minimum wage, which had been raised spontaneously in the Mahalla strikes, emerged as a central goal of the developing worker Project, which interpellated and united different workers as members of the same working class.

¹⁰¹⁴ Interview with Inas Safti, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

¹⁰¹⁵ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

CHAPTER 16

Intellectuals of/for the Strike

*The thinker resides at the Café Riche
Ya3eesh! Ya3eesh!
Preening and pompous, glib slick and loquacious
Never goes to the demos -
Crowds? never, good gracious!
With a few empty words
Some wide turns of phrase
He whips up solutions for every bad case
The thinker lives, may he live long live live!
Live on, my countryfolk, live on, ya3eesh!
Ahmad Fouad Negm (in: Booth 2009: 37)*

Mahalla's Proletarian Intellectuals

As neither the traditional leftist parties nor the state-controlled General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU) played their part as proletarian leaderships, the task of organizing and directing the various struggles fell onto the grassroots committees:¹⁰¹⁶ *"The trade union gives only services to the workers, but doesn't defend their demands. In reality: workers make their own leadership."*¹⁰¹⁷ Proletarian intellectuals are the product of both the present and the past of class struggle. Old leaders and activists are interpellated and re-activated by worker actions, and new organic intellectuals are produced through the activity of protest itself. With regard to the Mahalla movement, strike leader Sayyid Habib explained that:

*The Mahalla workers had the advantage of a more or less continuous leadership since 1975. The strike leaders organized groups in every section of the company, incessantly discussing with the workers and calling on them to make a strike. Through the strike movement a new generation of leaders emerged, which led the strikes of 2007 and 2008.*¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰¹⁶ Al-Mahdi 2011b.

¹⁰¹⁷ Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹⁰¹⁸ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

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. This was necessary because from 2007 onwards the regime started to transfer traditional strike leaders to other workplaces in order to break the strike spirit and organization.¹⁰¹⁹

Most of the “old” worker leaders were not affiliated to any political organization,¹⁰²⁰ but they were active and organized in official GFETU committees. Even though they shared a Subjectivity of being “workers” they were often white-collar employees: supervisors, engineers, and educated layers with a different social status in the company.¹⁰²¹ In fact, before the rigged trade union elections of 2006, a majority of Mahalla worker leaders were part of the labor bureaucracy, and their removal from the GFETU committees was an additional and important stimulus to the organization of protests outside the formal structures of the State syndicate. A cynic might conclude that these worker leaders only turned to their rank-and-file to defend their own, narrow bureaucratic interests. Regardless of the intentions of the Mahalla proletarian intellectuals, it is much more productive to conceive of the relation between organic intellectuals and their class base as a reciprocal process. The workers gained the cooperation of “their” intellectuals as much as these figures won the support of “their” rank-and-file. It is the self-organizing activity of the workers that interpellates old intellectuals back to the proletarian Project and produces new organic leaders and activists. Conversely, the lack or disintegration of such an activity-system alienates organic intellectuals from their class base. This reciprocal relation is in trade union circles expressed in the “good sense” notions of “pressure from the base” and “pressure from the top”. Therefore, the question is not whether this or that individual proletarian intellectual is “essentially” a “bureaucrat” or a “genuine” defender of worker interests, but if he or she participates in a solidary and organic way in a proletarian activity-system.

In Mahalla, the old proletarian intellectuals who were ousted from the GFETU structures supported the workers in their confrontation with the official labor representatives and helped them in setting up their own independent

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹⁰²¹ Conversation with Per Björklund, Cairo, 5 May 2009.

organizations at the factory level to organize the strikes.¹⁰²² In addition, with the help of “traditional” intellectuals such as political and civil activists, they established the Textile Workers’ League, which played a crucial role in organizing the September 2007 strike.¹⁰²³ Both “old” and “new” strike committee leaders were conceived of as the “real” and organic leaders of the Mahalla worker Subject.

Workers also engaged in the aesthetic and ideological articulation of their struggle, becoming “cultural” organic intellectuals:

*The art of the caricature is not about drawing pictures but about making the lines say something and they can do it. Drawing is something the workers can learn in three months or so if they wanted to. But the workers are the creators of the ideas. So it's not only a possibility: it's a reality that some workers are artists.*¹⁰²⁴

Whereas Hassanein al-Fanan was optimistic about the organic development of workers’ art, Wael Tawfiq stressed its limits: *“In each strike, especially during the last period, some artistic expressions appeared, people who wrote poetry and so on, but each time it dies.”*¹⁰²⁵

The art forms that workers spontaneously produced were *ad hoc* creations or performances within the strike activity-system. Songs, poetry, graffiti and cartoons were reproduced within the collective memory of the working class, but without an institutionalization of the cultural dimension of the Strike, it was difficult for workers to develop these art forms in a stable, coherent and systematic way. It was still the songs of Shaykh Imam and the poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm from the 1970s that dominated the cultural expression of the workers’ protests in the new millennium. The development of strike committees into trade unions answered the need for direction and organization of the workers’ activity-system. Some trade unions also engaged in cultural production, but this had traditionally been the domain of the Modern Prince, and required the formation of a suitable apparatus and pedagogy.

¹⁰²² Alexander 2012.

¹⁰²³ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹⁰²⁴ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

¹⁰²⁵ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

Assistance in Development

Back to Class

Returning to Marx's principle that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself, one could argue that the Egyptian workers were perfectly able to solve their own problems. They formed their own organic intellectuals, started to overcome their economic-corporate predicament, and even developed in the direction of a political force before the 25 January Revolution. On the other hand, it was clear that non-proletarian actors played an important role in developing the workers' activity-system(s) by raising awareness, connecting various instances of the Strike, setting up organizations, expressing the struggle aesthetically and ideologically, et cetera. The question of whether workers are able to develop "autonomously" and "in isolation" from other forces into a Subject-for-itself is, in reality, nothing but a thought experiment. In any social formation, workers confront and are confronted by other social Subjects that mediate their developmental trajectory. The question thus is not *whether* workers are influenced by other actors, but *how* they relate to these "external" forces and how their formation as a social Subject is shaped by this interaction. Conversely, non-proletarian actors can be interpellated by workers to join and support their activity-system.

Before the Mahalla protests, civil society actors were relatively little interested in "economic" struggles. Helmi Sha'rawi of the African Arab Research Center (AARC) admitted that:

It is shameful that this privatization has been happening like that without any protest. Workers were dismissed from their factories without any protest movement. What is this? I myself am surprised. From 1975 to 1995, during 20 years the whole economy has been reorganized and transformed, the whole society was changed, dismissing people from their work, giving them pensions to leave with hundreds... If it will continue it will be a failure of the whole progressive movement in Egypt.¹⁰²⁶

Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq agreed: *"Had the political leaders in the nineties discovered the reality that workers have the same aims and problems because of the privatization, then they could have stopped the privatization itself."¹⁰²⁷*

¹⁰²⁶ Interview with Helmi Sha'rawi, Giza, 11 November 2010.

¹⁰²⁷ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

Of course, until the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, there was little grassroots mobilization in general, be it around economic or political issues. The Second Palestinian Intifada stimulated a new generation of young activists to participate in solidarity meetings, sit-ins and rallies, ending two decades of apathy towards street politics. This spontaneous activity-system spawned its own neoformations in the form of solidarity networks, which were transformed into anti-war committees with the advent of the Afghanistan and Iraq war. The anti-imperialist movement soon metamorphosed into a civil-democratic social Subject, especially in the form of *Kefaya*.

However, by 2006, the *Kefaya* Project had exhausted itself. Although the civil-democratic movement signified a rupture with the hegemony of the Mubarak clique, it did not succeed in building its own hegemonic apparatus, nor in drawing workers, peasants, and broad layers of the urban middle classes and sub-proletariat into its activity-system. Hisham Fouad of the SLCHR and the RS emphasized that: *“If the workers did not enter in a direct way in the Movement for Change it is because of two reasons: the Change movement did not form any social demand and the workers did not add their social demands to its agenda.”*¹⁰²⁸ The purely political demands of the civil-democratic Subject did not offer the subaltern classes the means of overcoming their economic problems.¹⁰²⁹

Cut off from society at large and ridden with internal disagreements, the *Kefaya* movement started to disintegrate – just when the Mahalla strike movement was on the rise. Baho Abdul, a member of the RS and of *Tadamon*, acknowledged that:

*The urban middle-class intellectuals had failed to build relations with the workers. Before 2006 no one in the political field was interested in the workers’ movement, because there did not seem to be a real movement. The strike of December 2006 changed everything. All parties went to the movement.*¹⁰³⁰

The saliency of the strikes led to a re-appreciation of the workers’ movement as a force of societal change, and called a number of traditional intellectuals “back to class”.

¹⁰²⁸ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

¹⁰²⁹ Solidarity Center 2010: 14.

¹⁰³⁰ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 10 May 2009.

Types of Assistance¹⁰³¹

When they engaged with the Mahalla strike movement, traditional intellectuals such as journalists, lawyers, human rights and political activists, writers and artists offered the emerging worker Subject different *types* of assistance: “...reinforcing the protests through media support, trying to unite or to gather the labor communities, and developing, uniting and diffusing the existing demands”.¹⁰³²

Firstly, because of their social function, mobility and position as intellectuals, these actors could more easily transfer the experiences, methods and lessons from one instance of struggle to another. They acted as liaisons between organic intellectuals, literally mediating the internal communication and consciousness of the decentralized worker Subject. Even though workers were still “physically” confined to the particular instances of their separate protests, their struggles became “virtually” 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, political activists, journalists, writers, et cetera, then traditional intellectuals transferred class experiences to the new generation.¹⁰³³

¹⁰³¹ The problem with presenting an analysis of assistance is that the portrayal should adequately represent a matrix of actors, modes and types of assistance. For example, I have to choose whether to discuss assistance from the perspective of (1) the workers; or (2) the traditional intellectuals. In the first case the mode of assistance becomes the main typology, as it is much more relevant for the proletarian activity-system *how* it is stimulated than by *whom* it is supported. The second option requires me to start with a categorization of the various types of traditional intellectuals and their organizations and then analyze their modes and types of assistance towards the workers’ movement; et cetera. In order to solve this problem of presentation I begin with an investigation from the point of view of the different traditional intellectuals and civil-democratic actors vis-à-vis the Mahalla strikes, focusing on whether the three main trends of the Old Left, New Left and, Muslim Brotherhood were or were not called “back to class”; and whether they did or did not assist in building the workers’ movement. In the next chapter, I reinvestigate these various forms of assistance through the lens of the workers’ movement, paying special attention to the different modes of assistance and the question which assistance pushed the development of the worker Subject forward. I conclude with a discussion of the dialectical pedagogy of the strikes, which could be conceived of as the mechanism which united organic and traditional intellectuals in an authentic, shared system of activity.

¹⁰³² Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

¹⁰³³ Ibid..

Secondly, through a diffusion of these experiences “on the ground” and their projection in the national sphere, e.g. in the media, traditional intellectuals made the spatially isolated strikes temporally contemporaneous in the lives of many workers. 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.

Thirdly, the projection of workers’ action in the national sphere saliently re-introduced the working class as a social force in Egyptian society. This projection mediated, on the one hand, the consciousness of workers of themselves as a class. Traditional intellectuals enabled workers to imagine themselves as a coherent working class despite the fact that they were far from organized as a national workers’ movement. On the other hand, this projection influenced the attitudes of other societal actors towards the workers. As I discuss below, the saliency of the Mahalla strikes called many traditional intellectuals “back to class”.

Fourthly, journalists, writers and activists helped to develop the *particular* grievances of the Mahalla strikers into *general* demands of the working class. These general demands, such as a fair national minimum wage and a solution for the position of temporary workers, in turn, unified workers from different sectors and lifted their struggle from the economic-particular to a national trade unionist level.¹⁰³⁴

In conclusion, assistance by traditional intellectuals imagined and organized workers from Mahalla and elsewhere as a national working class, and encouraged them to overcome their economic-corporate condition. The types of assistance can be summarized as “connection”, “projection” and “expression”. **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. **Projective assistance** helps the workers to lift their struggle from the local, particular level to the national, general scale. It mediates the *vertical* sublation of the spatial fragmentation of the working class by the heteroleptic imagining of the workers as a social Subject. Mahalla workers metamorphosed from a workforce striking for their own specific interests into the vanguard of a

¹⁰³⁴ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

national working class. Lastly, **expressive assistance** supports the development of a philosophy of praxis by the interpenetration of the spontaneous “good sense” of the strikers with “scientific” forms of knowledge: narration, analysis, theoretization, conceptualization, et cetera – i.e. the maturation of a “true” self-concept of the workers’ movement and of a political-economic critique of the neoliberal historical bloc.

Political Activists

The Old Left

When I confronted *Tagammu* chairman Rifaat al-Said about the militancy of the Mahalla strikes, he remained pessimistic, pointing to the failed insurrection of 1977. The only option for the leftist opposition was to slowly build its forces until “the regime, perhaps, retreats”.¹⁰³⁵ In al-Said’s view, the political role of *Tagammu* had been narrowed down to an oppositional discourse in the media and during elections.¹⁰³⁶ He did not recognize the workers’ movement as a social force able to transform *al-nizam*.

At first sight, the position of Samir Al-Fayyad, another *Tagammu* leader, was opposed to the perspective of al-Said. According to al-Fayyad, grassroots movements would play a fundamental role in changing the Egyptian regime. He added that, in the past, communists and socialists had made the mistake of dominating these movements, suffocating their potential to emancipate themselves. Today “the workers must do it themselves”, and a party like *Tagammu*, through propaganda, parliamentary interventions and the media, could only support the actions, strikes and sit-ins that spontaneously emerged from the people itself. As the movement was not yet mature enough to challenge the regime in a unified, political way, *Tagammu* should refrain from advancing radical demands.¹⁰³⁷

In contrast with al-Said, al-Fayyad recognized the agency of the workers’ movement. Yet in his discourse, *Tagammu* was perceived as external to the development of the movement itself; the party could not and should not be actively intervening in the class struggle and raising political consciousness. With

¹⁰³⁵ Interview with Rifaat Al-Said, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁷ Interview with Sharif al-Fayyad, Cairo, 14 April 2009.

al-Fayyad, the principle of the self-emancipation of the working class was turned into an excuse for liquidating any proleptic role of leftist political activists in the class struggle. The assistance of *Tagammu* was restricted to projecting the workers as an autonomous movement and expressing their current state of development, instead of imagining them as a more advanced social and political power, and thus pushing their Subjectness forward. As I explained previously, this discourse of disengagement had its roots in the self-criticism of leftist intellectuals during the 1980s, with regard to their historical colonizing mode of assistance towards the workers' movement.

Leaders of the *Tagammu* "Trend for Change" explicitly went against the discourse of disengagement with the workers' movement that dominated the party leadership. In April 2009 I met with Ali al-Dhib, co-founder of *Tagammu*, member of the Central Committee, and secretary of the Council of Advisors, who forcefully claimed that:

*The goal of Tagammu is socialism. The current crisis shows that capitalism fails; even the capitalists themselves now take recourse to nationalizations. This means that we should go back to the original role of a socialist party. The last 5 years have seen a wave of strikes, demonstrations, new NGOs, which confirm this... The constant pressure on wages forces the working class to protest. However, they are not yet organized as a political force. Moreover, the movement is very fragmented, both in organization as in the level of political consciousness. Mahalla is the vanguard of the movement. Tagammu should join these movements and always be at the heart of the strikes... Officially, Tagammu hopes the regime will give enough democratic room for reform. Personally, I am not sure of this strategy and I don't think there will be this kind of opportunity.*¹⁰³⁸

Al-Dhib attacked the official party line on three fronts. Firstly, *Tagammu* should explicitly strive for socialism, not "national capitalism" or any other "Third Way". Secondly, the party should actively engage with the class struggle and street politics to raise political consciousness. Thirdly, democracy would not arise from top-down reforms – change had to come from below. These three concerns reverberated especially among the youth and the middle-cadres of this "Old Left" party. This discourse of engagement pushed *Tagammu* activists into an active assistance towards the workers' movement. It stimulated them to participate in the proletarian activity-system – "...join these movements and always be at the heart of

¹⁰³⁸ Interview with Ali Al-Dhib, Cairo, 3 April 2009.

the strikes...” – in order to help workers to overcome the horizontal atomization of their movement – “...*the movement is very fragmented, both in organization...*” – and vertically develop “...*the level of political consciousness*”.

Leftist *Tagammu* labor activists such as Talal Shukr had a long tradition of assisting the workers’ movement: “*We support the workers’ movement at any place, for example through our solidarity articles in al-Ahali. We gather workers, give them training and raise syndicalist issues.*”¹⁰³⁹ *Tagammu* labor leader Abd al-Rashid Hilal summarized the assistance by the party’s labor committee as follows:

*First the committee sends reports to all the newspapers, not only al-Ahali. Second, the committee goes to the strike to see the aims of the workers and to send documents to the union as the Tagammu labor committee. We also give legal help. If the workers need a lawyer, Tagammu will offer them for free. We will give them food, clothes, blankets, etc.*¹⁰⁴⁰

Apart from some connective assistance, the *Tagammu* labor committee mostly offered practical support by acting as a middleman between strikers and the State union, giving legal aid, and distributing material goods to continue the strike. However, it would be more correct to see these labor leaders with a clear working class background as organic proletarian intellectuals who had been politicized in the 1970s and then became a part of the fledgling Modern Prince that *Tagammu* once appeared to be. Labor leaders such as Saud Omar who left the party because of its right-wing and disengaged leadership, recognized the role of these individual leftist *Tagammu* activists in supporting the workers’ movement:

*In Cairo the central labor office in Tagammu is more active and it has a lot of labor leaders that are smart and active and we are cooperating with a lot of strikes. But it’s a pity a lot of Tagammu leaders are so old...*¹⁰⁴¹

Yet, from the Second Palestinian Intifada on, there seemed to be some truth in Helmi Sha’rawi’s statement that: “*The political parties were sleeping but they have become better now.*”¹⁰⁴² For example, Geber Serkis of the ADNP recalled that they not only supported the Mahalla workers through their *al-Arabi* newspaper, but also were standing side by side with the strikers:

¹⁰³⁹ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Interview with Abd al-Rashid Hilal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

¹⁰⁴¹ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹⁰⁴² Interview with Helmi Sha’rawi, Giza, 11 November 2010.

During the last strike the labor secretary of the Nasserist party and others came from Cairo and entered the factory, despite the security, and give the workers statements to support them and to support their legal issues. We also have some Nasserist workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla.¹⁰⁴³

Whereas the leaders of the *Trend for Change* voiced the concerns of rank-and-file *Tagammu* members in the Cairo headquarters, a number of the Old Left's young militants actively participated in local economic and political struggles – often without support from the party leadership. Ahmed Belal, leader of the UPY, member of the Central Committee of *Tagammu*, and political activist in his hometown of Mahalla al-Kubra, emphasized the necessity for political activists to go to the factories and link up with the workers.¹⁰⁴⁴ When I was in Mahalla in 2009 and 2010, I spoke with Belal, who attempted to turn the UPY into a vehicle of intra-party opposition, and Muhammad Fathi, who was active in the labor group of *Tagammu* in Mahalla. Muhammad Fathi confided in me that:

The events in Mahalla have made Tagammu members more conscious about the need to be close to the common people in the streets and the factories. But the leadership obstructs our party branch in Mahalla in working with the workers. For example, during the strike in December 2007, the leadership warned the workers not to speak with us lest the police would come and arrest them. They play a negative role.¹⁰⁴⁵

Local activists organized solidarity actions, in defiance of party leadership: “Support for the strike in Mahalla was only organized by particular activists in the Union of Progressive Youth. The party leaders in Cairo refused to participate in order to protect their relations with the government.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Muhammad Fathi explained how *Tagammu* activists strengthened the worker activity-system:

On September 23, the day of the strike, the Union of Progressive Youth organized a demonstration in solidarity with the workers in front of the City Council... We discussed with the workers how we could advance their demands and we spoke with the media and the newspapers, asking them to come to our city. We called the leaders in our party, demanding them to take a more radical position because we believed that this strike would be the locomotive that would pull all the future

¹⁰⁴³ Interview with Geber Serkis, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Mahalla 6 April, 2009.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

*strikes. We asked our party in Cairo to appraise this movement in a good way. We also called some people who could bring food for the workers... We told the workers that their strike was a good action and we talked with them about their rights... We also tried to organize international support... We were in the factories for six days, side by side with the workers, and we smuggled statements inside and distributed them.*¹⁰⁴⁷

Through the presence of grassroots activists in Mahalla, who also participated in national and even international systems of political activity, the spatial boundaries of the strikes were more easily overcome. These activists could switch between their Subjectivity as an embedded actor in the Mahalla activity-system and as a member of the national and global political community. Using their dual position as Mahalla citizens and Cairo-based politicians, they were able to offer important connective and projective assistance to the developing strike movement. Saud Omar commented that there were many such activists and leaders within the Old Left who were "...cooperating and playing a good role..."¹⁰⁴⁸ on an individual basis.¹⁰⁴⁹ Even though the "party line" of the Old Left was often one of disengagement with the class struggle, individual activists and leaders assisted the workers' movement in developing and systematizing its activity.

The New Left

Between 2000 and 2006 the Revolutionary Socialists had focused on the democratic struggle and the recruitment of students. The rise of street politics and the civil-democratic movement in 2002 had solved the split between the RS and *Sharara* group in practice, and the two factions reunited. Yet the failure of *Kefaya* opened up new lines of discussion. One faction claimed that the RS had made a mistake with its involvement in *Kefaya*, and that they should have focused on building their own apparatus instead of engaging with a "petty-bourgeois" movement, whereas the other tendency suggested that the idea of building the party through these movements had been sound, but that they should analyze where *Kefaya* went wrong.¹⁰⁵⁰

¹⁰⁴⁷ Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Also see Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

The resurgence of the labor movement and the decline of *Kefaya* oriented the RS “back to class”.¹⁰⁵¹ In 2006, Baho Abdul was one of the RS youth who was disappointed with the inability of *Kefaya* and the *Youth for Change* to forge close ties with the workers’ movement. She saw the gap between traditional intellectuals and workers as one of the biggest problems of the struggle against the regime. While the urban, almost exclusively Cairo based, middle-class intelligentsia busied itself with politics without movements, the protest movements that emerged spontaneously in the factories, in the slums and in the countryside were alienated from the political field. This divide between the social and the political, and between workers and intellectuals, stimulated leading members of the RS such as Fatma Ramadan to support the establishment of *Tadamon*: “a solidarity movement which tries to bridge the gap between intellectuals and workers, political and social demands.”¹⁰⁵²

The RS developed an internal division of labor, whereby one part was engaged with the workers’ struggle, while another focused on building the organization and publishing the paper. *Tadamon* was explicitly established to assist the workers in the development of their activity-system, as Baho Abdul explained:

*The main idea of Tadamon is that change won’t come from above, from politicians, journalists and writers, but from the bottom. So we began to think how the workers can be unified, how they can learn from each others’ experiences and how they can overcome problems.*¹⁰⁵³

In 2010, Fatma Ramadan summarized the short history, tasks and *modus operandi* of *Tadamon* as follows:

...Tadamon started since three years. The Mahalla strikes were like an earthquake to all the people, so we were thinking how to change the workers and how to connect the workers to the villagers and fishermen, and how to make a network between them, and how to support them, not only financially, but also through exchanging experiences.

A year after starting Tadamon we realized that we had one aim: connecting the workers and giving them support, but we realized also that there were a lot of questions: such as how to connect with the labor movement. So we had a lot of

¹⁰⁵¹ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

¹⁰⁵² Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 15 May 2009.

¹⁰⁵³ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

salons and conferences with workers and villagers to get inside the movement, not to support it from the outside.

At first we just gave advice and aid. Step by step the workers came to Tadamon to ask for advice concerning a strike.

Between February and May last year there was a new strike wave from workers of seven to eight factories and they began a series of demonstrations in front of the parliament. Tadamon was trying to connect the workers of the seven to eight factories with each other so they would be stronger. To connect Ominestu and Amon Situ and Tanta workers and show them that their aims about salaries are the same and to bring them together to the union, to make them write a joint statement, to unite the movements.

In the next step we saw that a lot of organizations and a lot of people supported the workers, but everyone on its own. Like Tagammu and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights supported the workers but on their own. So we tried to make one committee that brings all the supporters of the workers together so they can speak with one voice and give one advice. Otherwise Tagammu for example advises to end the strike and Tadamon gives them the advice to continue the strike. So they decided to create this committee to speak with one voice.¹⁰⁵⁴

What did *Tadamon's* explicitly formulated assistance in proletarian development entail? Firstly, *Tadamon* wanted: "...to get inside the movement, not to support it from the outside...". There was a drive among *Tadamon* leaders to not just establish a relation of assistance between two groups, civil-democratic activists and workers, but to create a shared activity-system of solidarity. Secondly, *Tadamon* tried to overcome the internal socio-spatial fragmentation of the working class by connecting labor leaders with one another, transferring methods and lessons, and "...show them that their aims about salaries are the same...". Mustafa Bassiouny, a leading member of the RS illustrated how intellectuals transferred the workers' experiences from one instance of struggle to another:

During the Mahalla strike we used a lot of whistles and drums, and when I went to the tax workers strikes we exchanged the experience of the drums and whistles. ...We also informed the workers on how to conduct negotiations, how to strike, and how to deal with the security.¹⁰⁵⁵

¹⁰⁵⁴ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

Thirdly, workers were connected with other subaltern groups such as villagers and fishermen to exchange experiences and unite their struggle. Fourthly, *Tadamon* aimed to unite and streamline the assistance of other traditional intellectuals who were active in the workers' movement. Additionally, through the organization of international solidarity, e.g. via the Cairo International Conference and Liberation Forum; "*workers gain strength and hope, they are able to see the broader picture, see things in international class terms, et cetera.*"¹⁰⁵⁶

Tadamon's activity of solidary assistance transformed the group from the extension of a political organization, the RS, into a diverse group of traditional intellectuals with proletarian Subjectivities:

*...students, journalists, researchers, political activists... all connected in their idea that the workers will change the political situation. Activists and journalists that are members in Tadamon are trying to create a network between us and the workers and the villagers and we want to think together with the workers how they can push for change.*¹⁰⁵⁷

Saud Omar praised the role of New Left political organizations vis-à-vis the Old Left parties:

*I have a long time experience working in political parties, since 1979 until 2005. The political parties only comment on the action and write about them. And to say that this is the best class form or something. The political parties are not really active in these problems. And they are pretending that they have a powerful role in the strikes. A bigger role is for newer organization: Tadamon, the RS, and a lot of the labor leaders who are members of the labor committee.*¹⁰⁵⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood

When I asked Said Husayni, Muslim Brother MP for Mahalla, if the *Ikhwan* supported the workers in their strikes, he claimed that:

*The Muslim Brotherhood supported the first strike on 7 December, 2006, which was a historical strike. I supported it, as an MP and a businessman. The Muslim Brotherhood workers participated in the strike. I went to the workers in the company and gave their demands to the management and the parliament.*¹⁰⁵⁹

¹⁰⁵⁶ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 10 May 2009.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

Talal Shukr, however, pointed out that:

*In the beginning they declared their participation. After a few days, they withdrew. They are continuously balancing. In most situations they take steps back, as they don't want to anger the government. The workers do not accept this attitude and they know that labor is not the field of the Muslim Brotherhood.*¹⁰⁶⁰

Likewise, leftist blogger and RS member Hossam al-Hamalawy acknowledged that the *Ikhwan* had a presence during the Mahalla strikes, but that they, as an organization, failed to give the workers any real assistance. During the September 2007 strike, Said Husayni was even denounced by the workers, who refused to let him in the factory because of the lack of support from the Brotherhood.¹⁰⁶¹ Muhammad Fathi recalled that: *"Said Husayni came to the strike and the Muslim Brotherhood said that he would make a statement for them. But he only came for show."*¹⁰⁶²

When I asked Kamal Abu al-Eita if the *Ikhwan* played a role in the independent trade union movement, he laughed and answered:

*Nothing! No support. I only have one Muslim Brother in a union of 50,000 members. Ikhwan owns a lot of factories that had strikes. That's it. They are adopting capitalist policies. Even if they call it an Islamic economy it is capitalist. They are the sons of capitalism: even their trade and finance are capitalist. The government was using the Brothers to frighten the workers...*¹⁰⁶³

The answer of al-Badry al-Farghaly, founder of the pensioners' union, when questioned if there were members of the Brotherhood in the pensioners' union, was laconic: *"Ma fish, never."*¹⁰⁶⁴ Ahmed al-Sayyid of the health technicians' union also claimed that the Society did not support them at all:

*The Ikhwan is only an ogre. An ogre made by the ex-regime. It is not real. The Ikhwan are not playing a big role. The regime only uses them to frighten people. I never met one of them during my trade union work.*¹⁰⁶⁵

¹⁰⁶⁰ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

¹⁰⁶¹ Conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009.

¹⁰⁶² Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹⁰⁶³ Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Interview with al-Badry Farghaly, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Interview with Ahmed al-Sayyid, Cairo, 23 March 2011.

Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq gave another example of the vacillating attitude of the Society towards the development of the Strike:

You will discover the reality of the Ikhwan in the labor strikes. Especially the factories that had a lot of Ikhwan labor leaders. You have to connect with them because they are workers in the factory, but they are also members in Ikhwan... In the Helwan Cement strike a year ago, there were two trade union committee members who were from the Muslim Brothers. They were acting like the leaders, but when they wanted to end the strike after merely achieving two of the five demands in the strike all the workers went to the left. The Brothers said "come on, let's finish the strike, we have realized two of the five demands". I and a lot of comrades advised against ending the strike and it made a row between us and the Brotherhood members and they started to attack our group, claiming that we wanted to destroy the workers' future, but the workers defended us against the Brotherhood members.¹⁰⁶⁶

In general, as an organization, the Brotherhood assisted the workers by helping in their negotiations with the management and the Ministry of Manpower, and by providing material support to strikers, but it did not support the development of the workers' Project. Baho Abdul of Tadamon agreed: *"The Muslim Brotherhood never leads, but often helps, for example, with food distribution to strikers."*¹⁰⁶⁷ Helmi Sha'rawi of the AARC conceded that the Brotherhood provided food to the strikes, but *"...the prestige of helping and being helpful is important for the Brothers, not their presence in the movement."*¹⁰⁶⁸ Kamal Abbas, director of the CTUWS, explained that: *"...since 2005 they were closer to the labor movement, not because of the workers, but for their own benefit."*¹⁰⁶⁹ The Society sometimes recognized the interests and problems of workers as workers, but it did not recognize them as a legitimate and independent social or political force.

Saud Omar, however, painted a more complex picture of the attitude of individual Muslim Brothers towards the workers' strike activity:

The Muslim Brotherhood is a political power with its own project, but inside this organization there are a lot of social forces... So part of the Society is genuinely

¹⁰⁶⁶ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 15 May 2009.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Interview with Helmi Sha'rawi, Giza, 11 November 2010.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Interview with Kamal Abbas, Cairo, 27 March 2011.

*defending worker demands... Step by step the Brotherhood is changing – slowly maybe – but there is a dialogue, a growing understanding of labor cases...*¹⁰⁷⁰

The Suez labor leader gave the example of Yosry Bayumi, a Muslim Brother MP, who defended the rights of workers in parliament and the media. In Suez, the local branch of the Muslim Brothers came closer to the workers since the Mahalla strike movement, because the workers pushed them to this orientation. “*In the end the passenger finds the car that can transport him to the right direction,*” Omar smilingly concluded.¹⁰⁷¹

Fatma Ramadan agreed with Saud Omar that individual *Ikhwan* members genuinely assisted the workers’ movement. For instance, in *Tadamon*:

*We had youth from the Ikhwan, because it’s logical for them to join Tadamon because of the social and economic situation. We did not discuss the problems between the Ikhwan, who are right, and the left because we have an agreement on the idea that it is the workers who will change the country. The social problems are the connection between the different groups, so we do not discuss political differences. When Ikhwan and other leftists joined Tadamon they joined as individuals and they had an agreement that they will never discuss problems between the Ikhwan and the left. Tadamon is there only for the workers.*¹⁰⁷²

Those youth members of the Society who joined *Tadamon* agreed “...that it is the workers who will change the country...”; in contradistinction to the Brotherhood in general, they recognized the workers as a crucial social and political force in its own right. However, because the concept of “class” as a political-economic frame of analysis and mobilization traditionally belonged to the Left, working class-oriented organizations such as *Tadamon* were generally conceived of as politically leftist, regardless of the fact that these organizations gathered “...a lot of members from the *Ikhwan* and all political organizations”.¹⁰⁷³

Apart from individual Islamist activists, there were also factions within the “extended family” of the Brotherhood that supported the workers’ struggle, such as the *Amal* Party. Diaa al-Sawi, leader of the *Amal* youth organization claimed that:

¹⁰⁷⁰ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹⁰⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷² Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid.

*Before 2000 we had a big role, but in the last period we had not a big role among the workers, but we supported them through media, the paper and the website, through demonstrations in Cairo. Some delegates were used to going to the demonstrations of the peasants at that time: also to the Mahalla demonstration. Political delegates of our party went there and supported them.*¹⁰⁷⁴

However, as Diaa al-Sawi himself admitted, the role of organized “workerist” tendencies within the Islamist movement was limited to the engagement of a few individuals who were able and willing to mobilize their parties’ apparatus to support the strike movement.

Journalists

Journalists played an important role in the development of the Mahalla strike movement. Of course, not all journalists became fellow travelers to the workers’ movement. Mustafa Bassiouny remarked that the role of journalists: “...can be positive or negative, you have to specify if they are “national” [al-watani] or not. “National” journalists are writing against the strikes. Other journalists can be very positive for the labor movement.”¹⁰⁷⁵ Medhat al-Zahed concurred that: “It depends on the journalists and the newspaper. So it differs.”¹⁰⁷⁶ In general, journalists from newspapers such as al-Arabi, al-Ahali, al-Badil, al-Masri al-Yawm, al-Dostour and al-Shorouk covered labor issues in a way that assisted the development of the workers’ movement.¹⁰⁷⁷

Sabr Barakat explained that Mahalla became a turning point for the Egyptian workers’ movement, not only because of the character of the strike itself, as “...the labor movement didn’t stop at any time. It differed in shape from era to era...”,¹⁰⁷⁸ but because:

The difference is [that] the multimedia and the press and the newspapers moved to the strikes and labor movement and covered it, so our voice became louder and the strike image became clear...

By their help during the past few years the voice of the workers became louder. And their ability to contact each other has improved. So we can organize a lot of strikes,

¹⁰⁷⁴ Interview with Diaa al-Sawi, Cairo, 10 November 2010.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 9 November 2010.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

*more widespread strikes, more class strikes. The movement gained a new political aim.*¹⁰⁷⁹

Saud Omar was of the same opinion: *“There was a lot of support from the media. We gained a lot of experience: how to organize the strikes; how to define the demands; how to organize demonstrations. The media support was so important.”*¹⁰⁸⁰ Mahalla worker Faysal Lakusha commented that: *“I was in the 6 December strike and I don’t deny that the media were standing next to us and supporting us... The role of the media was very important, and they were supporting and covering us.”*¹⁰⁸¹ Abir Mehdawi, a young journalist, explained that: *“...some journalists are also activists, more and more nowadays. They play a role in sharing experiences and bringing local issues to the regional, national or even international level. They help spreading the culture of protest.”*¹⁰⁸²

Journalists gave “connective”, “projective”, and “expressive” assistance to the strike movement. Firstly, they diffused particular methods and forms of organization to the Egyptian working class in general, either indirectly and vertically, by writing about specific class conflicts in the national media, or directly and horizontally by transferring experiences from one concrete struggle to another. Secondly, by bringing the story of the Mahalla strikes in the national media, they projected and imagined the workers as a social force able to challenge the system. This narrative reinforced class Subjectivities among workers in other companies and encouraged them to solve their own particular problems in the same way as the Mahalla strikers. Thirdly, by expressing the demands of the Mahalla workers in the national sphere, they stimulated the generalization and articulation of these demands as aims of the whole Egyptian working class.

Whilst the media did not pay much attention to working class actions before 2006, the saliency of the Mahalla strike movement drew them “back to class”, especially because the struggle immediately followed the disintegration of *Kefaya*. Because of the political and organizational weakness of the opposition parties, journalists often played an active role during the civil-democratic and class

¹⁰⁷⁹ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹⁰⁸¹ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹⁰⁸² Interview with Abir Mehdawi, Cairo, 13 April 2009.

protests of the 2000s.¹⁰⁸³ Khaled al-Balshy, chief editor of the leftist al-Badil newspaper, was of the opinion that:

*The press in Egypt plays a big role, because the political parties are weak. Newspapers function as NGOs and parties. For example, in the Kefaya and Mahalla movements we played a clear role... After Kefaya in 2005 the anger in our society was articulated through the independent media. The media enable the movement to share its experiences on a national level. People who want to strike even ask us for our advice.*¹⁰⁸⁴

There was an interesting two-way transformation process whereby, on the one hand, journalists covering street politics became political actors, and, on the other, political activists became engaged in grassroots journalism to be closer to the workers. In Hossam al-Hamalawy's experience *"the easiest way to engage with the workers is being a journalist, as any political activism is a priori suspicious. Being the media means having authority."*¹⁰⁸⁵ Mustafa Bassiouny, who was not only a leading member of the RS but also a journalist for al-Dostour, agreed: *"For me journalism was a tool to be near to the labor movement... As a journalist I could get near to the workers without worrying about security and so..."*¹⁰⁸⁶

Artists

Whilst in the past the communist and left-nationalist movements had used their institutional and financial means to bring traditional intellectuals and workers together, since the 1980s the support from the Old Left for these initiatives dwindled. During the 1980s and 1990s, most artists became disengaged with street politics and the class movement.¹⁰⁸⁷ Essam Hanafy, a young caricaturist

¹⁰⁸³ Interview with Muhammad Abd el-Azim, Mahalla, 12 November 2010; Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010; interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 8 April 2010.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Some popular and populist bands or singers only expressed the poverty of the working class and the subproletariat without offering a political alternative or presenting an image of their social base as a potential collective agent capable of struggle: *"Like Shaban Abd al-Rahim, he sings about the tomato prices but he does not criticize the policies let alone give an alternative. He sings that he hates Israel but in an ordinary form... Abd al-Rahim is a huge star. His last song was about voting for Mubarak and if Mubarak wouldn't go to the elections he would vote for Gamal. He is one of those with interests in the regime. It is a low form of class art in order to be famous..."* (Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 11 November 2010) Whereas these art forms originated from the subaltern classes,

working for the Nasserist al-Arabi newspaper, claimed that this was because of economic and social pressures:

...the newspapers choose the cartoonists who defend their vision, so they are close to the new liberal economic policies. They are obliged to express the interests of the owners of the newspapers and not the national and social good... There is a huge number of cartoonists but few of them are engaged. Some laws restrict the artists to express themselves. Then there is social pressure. For example there was a political cartoonist who was engaged to be married, but the family of the bride broke the engagement because it was too dangerous.¹⁰⁸⁸

However, the rise of the civil-democratic and class movements in the last two decades called artists back into an engagement with political and economic issues. Writer Alaa al-Aswany contemplated that:

...a writer has a double vision, a double duty. A duty as a citizen and a duty as a writer. Many writers joined these movements, especially because these movements are not political parties. They are movements for a very determinate purpose, for democracy, justice and freedom. I cannot think of any writer who could stay away from the issue of freedom for example... I believe writers should join these movements.¹⁰⁸⁹

Despite the political engagement of a new layer of traditional intellectuals with a cultural function, only a few of these artists and writers recognized the workers as a social and political force. For example, when I asked the cartoonist Salah Abd al-Azim if he had been engaged with the workers' movement in his art, he replied:

No, for me this was not important. Mubarak was using these elements to complicate the struggle... for me the struggle is foremost against Mubarak. This is the struggle. The soil is not able to grow everything. First we should change the soil, then we can plant anything we want.¹⁰⁹⁰

Artists had to be explicitly leftist, and not just politically liberal, progressive or anti-authoritarian to recognize the Mahalla strike movement as a social Subject. For instance, *al-Ahali* cartoonist Hassanein "al-Fanan" claimed that "the workers of

they did not push forward the development of these groups into assertive social agents. They rather expressed the passivity and dependency of these societal layers vis-à-vis *al-nizam*.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Interview with Essam Hanafy, Cairo, 25 November 2010

¹⁰⁸⁹ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2011.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

Ghazl al-Mahalla make the artists move: the artists do not move the workers. They are the ones giving artists ideas. Artists base their ideas on the workers."¹⁰⁹¹ Caricaturists, in particular, played a central role in the articulation and development of class demands and forms of consciousness. According to Essam Hanafy:

*The caricature is related to the society. The caricaturist has to follow up social and political events, especially subjects involving workers and peasants; those who suffer social and economic problems due to the current policies of capitalism in Egypt. He has to follow the news and check what happens with his activist friends. The cartoonist's mission is not only to make jokes, but also to make the people conscious. He expresses the situation in pictures. We were with the peasants against the landlords. Peasants were killed. Art must express the problem at hand, for example the insurrection of the Mahalla workers. There was a big pressure on the workers. The cartoonist acts upon events and of course he should sympathize with the workers and the peasants.*¹⁰⁹²

Because of the cartoon's political use, Hanafy explained that "*The cartoonist is... put under pressure and imprisoned because they are dangerous,*"¹⁰⁹³ and he joked that "*...writing a cartoon is like walking on a field with landmines.*"¹⁰⁹⁴ Art forms such as songs, graffiti, cartoons, sketches, and poems, projected and expressed the workers' predicaments as well as possible solutions to overcome them. Hassanein explained that:

*I was trying to draw what the workers want and the things as they see them. This helps the workers to think. **The caricatures make the workers know their interests and goals as a short-cut; they can understand everything from just a small picture.** This makes them appreciate caricatures. We know the problems, but we know from them what the problem is really like: what and how they really see it.*¹⁰⁹⁵

The caricature or cartoon was instrumental in the development of a "true" concept by workers of themselves as a social and political force, and of a critique of *al-nizam*. Firstly, cartoons are easily accessible and reproducible; they are not exclusively found in art galleries, which are detached from the "lifeworld" of the

¹⁰⁹¹ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

¹⁰⁹² Interview with Essam Hanafy, Cairo, 25 November 2010.

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010. My emphasis.

class, but they are “...the art of the poor people...”¹⁰⁹⁶, printed in newspapers and painted on walls and streets. Secondly, a caricature is a sign that combines a “simple” form or signifier with a “complex” content or signified. A political cartoon has the potential to act as a **microcosm** of the whole *nizam*, inviting the interpreter to unfold the simple image of the caricature into the complex *Gestalt* of the subject matter it represents.

Human Rights Activists

During the 1990s and 2000s – similarly to journalists – human and civil rights activists often had to step in to fill the void left by the bureaucratization of the trade unions and the disengagement of political parties with grassroots politics.¹⁰⁹⁷ Political activists frequently established or joined NGOs to get hold of a semi-legal apparatus and domain of work. The RS created the Center for Socialist Studies in Giza and some of its members, like Hisham Fouad, were active in the Sons of Land Center for Human Rights; the ECP had its Socialist Horizons Center; Saud Omar became active in the Suez Democratic Forum; et cetera.

Two centers gathering activists stood out for their support for the workers’ movement in general and for their role in the Mahalla strike movement in particular: the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center.¹⁰⁹⁸ Other noteworthy NGOs with a (partial) “working class orientation” were the SLCHR¹⁰⁹⁹ and the New Woman Foundation¹¹⁰⁰.

The CTUWS was one of the pioneers of grassroots-oriented NGOs in Egypt. The organization was established in 1990 in Helwan and spread to other industrial cities such as Mahalla al-Kubra. In 1993 it was recognized and supported as a partner-NGO of Oxfam Novib. Kamal Abbas summarized the tasks and aims of the center:

...we organize the leaders in the companies, exchanging the problems of labor in different factories, then working with them, organizing campaigns. When a strike

¹⁰⁹⁶ Interview with Essam Hanafy, Cairo, 25 November 2010.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Interview with Inas Safti, Cairo, 27 October 2010.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo, 20 March 2010; Interview with Muhammad Abd al-Azim, Mahalla, 12 November 2010; Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 10 October 2010.

¹¹⁰⁰ Interview with Nawla Darwish, Cairo, 16 February 2008.

*or demonstration begins, we keep in contact with them, contact the media and keep in touch with them. In addition, we help workers with their negotiations, giving them ideas, and so on.*¹¹⁰¹

In December 2006 the Mahalla branch of the CTUWS was the main focal point of the strike movement, offering practical, legal and material support to the workers and organizing solidarity.¹¹⁰²

The HMLC was established in 1999 and had its roots in legal aid associations of the 1990s. One of the key figures was Khaled Ali, a lawyer and human rights activist since 1994, who was a co-founder of HMLC and who, in 2010, created the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). Khaled Ali elucidated his assisting role as a traditional intellectual towards the workers' movement:

*Throughout my activism I was working on labor issues and helped with the establishment of the coordinating committee for labor and union rights since 2001... Firstly, as a lawyer I was giving free legal advice and litigation, and secondly I worked as a trainer for workers to raise their awareness of their labor rights... The most significant cases were during the trade union elections. The first one in 2001-2006; the second one in 2006-2011... During these elections one of the cases that was raised was the privatization of health insurance. These cases were very important because they halted the privatization of health insurance... There were two other cases: firstly: the minimum wage. The center was successful in getting a judgment of the court in the workers' favor. This is the first time a court set a minimum wage for workers... Secondly, the case of Tanta company when the owner prevented the workers from the right to work. The workers right to work was always used against the workers during strikes, but this time they were able to use this right of workers to work against the businessman himself. The court sentenced him to imprisonment... I also issued a lot of publications for workers to raise their awareness: for example, I issued a report on workers without trade unions and trade unions without workers, on the trade union elections 2001-2006. I also issued many other publications about labor conditions, and so on.*¹¹⁰³

Osama Muhammad Khalil, a director of HMLC, explained that:

We work with workers' problems and the problem of fired workers. Sometimes the journalists bring us workers cases, sometimes workers bring us their cases directly. We only accept cases that deal with unions and firing. A lot of the employees in the

¹¹⁰¹ Interview with Kamal Abbas, Cairo, 27 March 2011.

¹¹⁰² Interview with Abdul Kader, Mahalla, May 20 2009.

¹¹⁰³ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

*center are activists themselves. Everyone knows about the HMLC; when there is a strike the center establishes a committee to help the workers in the strike.*¹¹⁰⁴

The assistance given by human and civil rights centers was primarily oriented towards the overcoming of practical obstacles in the development of the workers' strike activity. Firstly, human rights lawyers knew the procedures, registers, codes and performances of the legal apparatus, and by lending the workers their expertise they made sure strikers could appropriate the same concrete ideological and institutional tools that the regime and the ruling classes used against them. Secondly, as legal specialists, these traditional intellectuals raised awareness among workers of their labor and constitutional rights, projecting and interpellating strikers as members of a national working class with its own, shared system of rights. Workers had general rights, both as citizens and as wage laborers, and the consciousness of these general rights in turn generalized proletarian and civil-democratic Subjectivities among the workforce. Thirdly, human and civil rights activists such as Khaled Ali did not only fight to safeguard the existing labor conditions, but also to improve the rights and livelihoods of the workers, for example through the demand of a fair national minimum wage. From 2010 onwards the ECESR organized and supported worker protests demanding the national minimum wage, and these actions became a **leading activity** for the class as a whole, stimulating the unity of the workers' movement.¹¹⁰⁵ Fourthly, because of their connection to international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and trade union solidarity campaigns, NGOs with a working class orientation stimulated an exchange of experiences, achievements, and ideas between Egyptian and foreign syndicalists.¹¹⁰⁶

¹¹⁰⁴ Interview with Osama Muhammad Khalil, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

¹¹⁰⁵ Interview with Muhammad Abd al-Azim, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹¹⁰⁶ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

CHAPTER 17

A Deontology of Assistance

The political trends and the intellectuals have to be more close to the workers and the people if they want to make a general strike... They have to grasp our way of living. The awareness of the workers is low. Political leaders have to speak the same language of the people. They don't want to go to the workers but they want the workers to go to them. That's why the political trends and the workers are far from each other.

Sayyid Habib, Mahalla worker leader, Interview, Mahalla, 12 November 2010

Modes of Assistance

Traditional intellectuals came to the budding workers' movement with various interests, attitudes and methods, which were not all beneficial to the development of the proletarian activity-system. I use Andy Blunden's (2010) typology of "modes of assistance" to discern between shared activity-systems of colonization, commodification and solidarity. As I have explained this approach in detail in my methodological chapters, here I simply summarize the main outlines. Drawing on Hegel, Blunden observed that there are different ways in which one can interact with a Subject: (1) non-recognition; (2) colonization; (3) commodification; (4) solidarity. **Non-recognition** means that the existence of the Other is not acknowledged. When two Subjects who do not recognize each other as Subjects meet, they ignore each other, or, in the worst case, one of them is symbolically or physically eradicated. **Colonization** is the subsumption of a servile Subject into another, dominant, Subject. Workers are recognized as a social actor, but their Subjectivity "as workers" is submitted to other projects. The colonizer often presents itself as the guardian of the interests of a helpless Other. **Commodification** is the one-dimensional recognition of a Subject as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. The Subject is fully acknowledged, but treated as a mere exchange value: a commodity. Recognition is conditional, depending on the usefulness of the Other. **Solidarity** is a single system of activity between two Subjects aimed at reinforcing the agency of both Subjects.

Non-Recognition

Even though the Mahalla strikes called many traditional intellectuals “back to class”, not all of them recognized the workers as a social Subject. Rightist leaders of the Old Left such as Rifaat al-Said dismissed the notion that the workers could play a role in overcoming their own economic predicament, let alone be an agent in overthrowing the regime.

Some liberal political activists and artists such as Salah Abd al-Azim who believed in the power of *al-sha'b* to challenge *al-nizam* were suspicious of the workers' movement and considered strikes as a means for the regime to divert attention from the civil-democratic struggle. They discarded the notion of a proletarian Subjectivity and only recognized a civil-democratic Subjectivity: the right of workers to protest and mobilize *as citizens* against the corruption and the authoritarianism of the system.

Most *Ikhwan* leaders rejected the notion of a proletarian Project as well. A number of them acknowledged the plight of the workforce, but advocated a new, Islamic moral economy between employers and employees as a sublation of the contradictions between labor and capital. For example, “reformist” *Ikhwan* leader Essam al-Erian stated that:

...Islam introduced many principles and regulations for our life and it obligates us to be just. In Islam “social justice” means that rich people are obliged to pay what is called zakat to the poor. This is obligatory. And they are also advised to pay more than the zakat – maybe like a tax, but not a tax by the state, but a tax through religion. More than that, the individual is responsible for offering the minimum life expenses to his relatives, not only to himself; he cannot live alone. He is responsible for his family, he is responsible for his close relatives, his parents, maybe his daughters... not his daughters, his sisters; and maybe also his disabled brothers. He is responsible. And if somebody brought him before court, he is obliged to help those. So social justice means in our view and in Islam a very broad principle that is not imposed by the regime or by the government, it comes from the roots, the grassroots of the people. When they believe in it, they can cooperate with each other.¹¹⁰⁷

In his point of view, “social justice” does not flow from a certain political-economic constellation – an ensemble of social relations and forces that governs the material sources of wealth according to principles of equity and fairness – but

¹¹⁰⁷ Interview with Essam al-Erian, Cairo, 10 March 2008.

is the result of the individual moral attitudes of the rich and wealthy who, under the influence of Islam, support those in need. While this kind of charity may alleviate the direct suffering of individuals and groups, it perversely fetters the development of these subaltern categories into self-determining and autonomous social Subjects by institutionalizing a relation of dependency and clientelism.

Other traditional intellectuals, such as *Tagammu* leader Samir al-Fayyad, did conceive of the workers as a social force, but these figures did not recognize *themselves* as an agent capable of assisting the worker Subject in its development. Under the guise of the principle of self-emancipation – “*the workers must do it themselves*” – they liquidated any role for themselves in supporting the labor movement.

In general, however, the saliency and the militancy of the Mahalla strike movement, in combination with the disintegration of the civil-democratic movement, forced traditional intellectuals to develop an attitude towards the emerging worker Project. Assistance of the workers’ movement took on the shape of colonization, commodification, and solidarity.

Colonization

Colonization is the subsumption of a Subject into another Project. A colonizing Subject presents its own development as the best way to realize the goal of another Subject. The submissive Subject is subjugated to the lead of the dominating Subject.

When encountered with the strength and confidence of the workers’ movement, many *Ikhwan* activists could not simply ignore the workers as a social force. Some individual Muslim Brother militants and leaders came closer to the working class through their participation in a shared activity-system, according to Saud Omar¹¹⁰⁸ and Fatma Ramadan¹¹⁰⁹. Others tried to incorporate and subjugate the strike activity in the Project of the Society. This was done, firstly, through an overestimation of the role of *Ikhwan* leaders in the Mahalla strikes and the workers’ movement in general. Brotherhood figures such as Said Husayni projected themselves as the natural leaders of the working class. Their lack of militants in the organized labor movement was explained by a *reductio ad*

¹¹⁰⁸ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 17 October 2010.

¹¹⁰⁹ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

absurdum: because they had a great influence in the factories, they were the primary target of the regime and security apparatus; *ergo* their weakness was proof of their strength.¹¹¹⁰ Secondly, the workers' "good sense" of the contradictions between labor and capital was reframed within a national-culturalist paradigm. For example, Said Husayni translated the demand of the renationalization of privatized firms, which expressed the proletarian Subjectivity of many workers that the public companies where they labored were "theirs",¹¹¹¹ into a cultural-colonial or nationalist issue: "*The problem of privatizations in Egypt is that we have lost ownership of our industry. It is transferred to criminals or foreigners. The whole process is illegal.*"¹¹¹² Muhammad Abbas, a youth leader of the Brotherhood claimed that the Mubarak regime:

*...opened the doors of Egypt widely for foreign workers and industries. It didn't take care of the national industries to be able to compete with foreign industries. It is a problem of the system, not of individuals. The system protected the owners of the companies, and gave them technology. We will not get foreign workers to work here. There is a decision, I believe, to limit foreign workers. For sure, before we are Muslim Brothers we are Egyptians, so it is important that the Egyptian people should work and be employed. In the companies of al-Ikhwan we do not have any foreign workers.*¹¹¹³

Pitting Egyptian workers against foreign laborers, and Egyptian employers against foreign capitalists, shifted the "good sense" of political-economic exploitation away from the relation between labor and capital, towards a cultural-political contradiction between productive Egyptians and parasitic foreigners. However, as worker leaders such as Kamal Abbas, Kamal Abu al-Eita, Ahmed al-Sayyid, Al-Badry al-Farghaly, Talal Shukr, and others, made clear, in general the colonizing attitude of the Brotherhood had little impact on the development of the proletarian activity-system.¹¹¹⁴

Colonization was also a mode of assistance found among activists of the civil-democratic movement. The episode of the 6 April 2008 "general strike" epitomized the colonization of workers' actions by civil-democratic actors.

¹¹¹⁰ Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹¹¹ Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

¹¹¹² Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹¹³ Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹¹¹⁴ See previous chapters.

Charles Hirschkind framed the intervention from the perspective of the civil-democratic movement as follows:

*The strike, the largest anti-government mobilization to occur in Egypt in many years, had been initiated by labor activists in support of striking workers at the Mahalla textile factory who had for months been holding out for better salaries and improved work conditions. In the month leading up to the strike, however, the aim of the action enlarged beyond the scope of the specific concerns of the factory workers. Propelled by the efforts of a group of activists on Facebook, the strike shifted to become a national day of protest against the corruption of the Mubarak regime, and particularly against the regime's complete inaction in the face of steadily declining wages and rising prices.*¹¹¹⁵

Charles Hirschkind emphasized the importance of 6 April because of: "...the way the idea of a general strike had been generated... Egypt witnessed its most dramatic political mobilization in decades, an event that brought together people across the political spectrum, from Muslim Brotherhood members to Revolutionary Socialists."¹¹¹⁶ Yet on the ground, especially in Mahalla, most workers did not perceive the call for a general strike by "external" civil-democratic forces as an extension of their struggle, but rather as a voluntarist, political hijacking of their project. Mahalla worker leaders and labor activists accused *Kefaya* and other civil-democratic movements, parties and organizations of mobilizing them for their own political struggle.¹¹¹⁷ The failure of the 6 April Mahalla strike was partially due to these civil-democratic forces, which turned a strike into a high-profile political action, without preparing or organizing the workers for this new type of confrontation with the state. Baho Abdul commented that: "*The strike was called by some forces in Kefaya, but the timing was bad. They ignored the workers' demands and did not listen to them.*"¹¹¹⁸ Khaled Ali noted that:

It attracted many human rights activists but this didn't start them to work more on labor issues. But actually... it drove many political movements and political activists to jump on these movements and many politicians and political

¹¹¹⁵ Hirschkind 2011a. Also see Hirschkind 2011b.

¹¹¹⁶ Hirschkind 2011a.

¹¹¹⁷ Interview with Abd al-Rashid Hilal, Cairo, 9 October 2010; Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

¹¹¹⁸ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 15 May 2009.

*movements tried to reap the benefits of this. They were releasing conflicting statements that divided the movement itself.*¹¹¹⁹

Rather than introducing the “idea” of a general strike into the workers’ movement, the colonizing attitude of civil-democratic actors was one of the factors that led to the defeat of the Mahalla strike and the subsequent popular uprising. Between 6 April 2008 and the 25 January Revolution, Mahalla no longer played a leading part in the development of the Egyptian workers’ movement.

A more subtle form of colonization could be found among leftists who propagated some form of “stage theory” of the class struggle. The workers’ direct social demands had to be supported by the political parties in order to win them over to the fight for democracy that took precedence. This idea was popular among most liberal, Nasserist, *Tagammu* and ECP intellectuals. For example, despite being a local *Tagammu* activist engaged in the Mahalla strike movement, Muhammad Fathi asserted that: “*In Egypt you need a democracy first, then people become organized in classes and they will fight as classes.*”¹¹²⁰ ECP leader Salah Adly claimed that the class struggle in Egypt was muddled by “...*the problem of Israel...*” and “...*the problem of Islam...*”, which blurred a sharp contradiction “...*between rightist classes and classes like farmers and workers...*”¹¹²¹

*We place our hopes in the civil movement. It is a basic force upon which the Left has to rely for any change. The protest movements in Egypt are still spontaneous and developing, they are not politicized but they are the first steps on the path of change. And they are the first mission of the Left. The Left has not a presence in society unless it relies on these classes: these classes represent the force of change. Even if we don't agree with the other parties in the social domain, the political problems take priority... It is important to say that the struggle for democracy is different for leftists than for rightists. It does not mean only the freedom to elect and change the laws, but it means also the freedom of establishing trade unions and organizations for workers, farmers, students, the poor...*¹¹²²

Hamdeen Sabahi, the leader of the neo-Nasserist al-Karama party saw in the workers a force “*central to any political change in the country the way they have been*

¹¹¹⁹ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

¹¹²⁰ Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹¹²¹ Interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

¹¹²² Ibid.

throughout history"¹¹²³ but at the same time, al-Karama hesitated to support the formation of independent trade unions – which was ironic seeing as the first independent union, the RETAU, was established by Kamal Abu el-Eita, himself a long-time Nasserist leader.¹¹²⁴ Whereas leftist nationalists often emphasized that social justice was more important than democracy, they did not conceive of the workers as a separate societal force with a Subjectivity and Subjectness distinct from *al-sha'b*, the people.¹¹²⁵

Struggle as Commodity

A relation of commodification or exchange between two Subjects entails a mutual process of recognition by both actors of one another. Assistance is based on a *quid pro quo* base, as each activity-system conceives of the other as a useful instrument for its own development. The Other is only recognized as a means for the Self, and not as an end in itself.

During the Mahalla strike movement, journalists, human rights activists, and leftist parties have been accused of recruiting the workers' struggle for their own benefit. Khaled Ali summarized the important yet ambiguous role of journalists:

*...the most positive thing that happened in this stage was the attraction of human rights activists who worked with workers and tried to support their strikes and movements, and also journalists. They covered many issues of the labor movement. Actually they were very, very good at this. This is a positive side of the media and journalists covering the labor issues. This was due to their profession: they work on the level of the event.*¹¹²⁶

Many journalists covered the Mahalla strikes because they constituted, first and foremost, a news-worthy incident. 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 use the media themselves 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.

¹¹²³ Daily News Egypt 2010.

¹¹²⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹¹²⁵ Interview with Tareq Said, Cairo, 11 November 2010; Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

¹¹²⁶ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

However, as soon as the saliency and novelty of the strikes diminished, they lost their status as “event” and many journalists became disinterested and disengaged with the movement. Faysal Lakusha, a Mahalla worker leader, resentfully commented:

After the failed strike of 6 April 2008, the government started to fire worker leaders and the media did not stand by us. After the fire is out we have victims, but the media is not talking about the victims of the fire. The chief editors don't talk about the worker victims because there were no big actions.¹¹²⁷

Medhat al-Zahed, senior journalist of al-Badeel newspaper agreed that for most journalists who covered the *Kefaya* and Mahalla movements, “protest” was just another product to sell:

Of course when there is an active movement it will attract attention... When demonstrations happen in the street this is exciting and most [political] trends will report it. But only then. In-depth journalism is weak. You will find exciting, but not meaningful stories...¹¹²⁸

Political Sectarianism

Only politicized journalists or activists dabbling in grassroots journalism continued their engagement with the workers’ movement irrespective of its “value” as news. Yet their assistance was often based on an exchange relation that recognized the strikes primarily as a means of accumulating members and building influence amongst the working class. Hassanein “al-Fanan” criticized the Left for its instrumental relation to the Mahalla strikes and its illusion of support:

All the other movements are jumping on the Mahalla movement and are trying to recuperate it, to gain something from it... Even if they are sincere, even if there are some people who are really interested in this cause and even if they try hard, they made the workers believe that they are powerful forces but they aren't.¹¹²⁹

Labor leader Sabr Barakat noted that:

¹¹²⁷ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Cairo 20, October 2010.

¹¹²⁸ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

¹¹²⁹ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

*A lot of political activists are using the labor movement as a means to take off. I did this in my youth, but it is a big mistake. The working class is the strongest force at the moment and has the biggest effect, larger than any other movement. What happened in Mahalla, the rise of the workers movement, was used by political activists, but it was not good for the movement's progress. It tried to push the movement in a certain direction.*¹¹³⁰

Traditional intellectuals agreed with worker leaders that the role of political activists was not always beneficial in the development of a proletarian activity-system. Khaled Ali remarked that "...many political activists jumped on the Mahalla movement and tried to reap the benefits. They were releasing conflicting statements which divided the movement itself."¹¹³¹ The different leftist trends accused each other of recruiting workers to their organization without supporting the movement itself. Tagammu activist Muhammad Fathi, for example, criticized the RS:

*The Revolutionary Socialists came to join the demonstration. They came from Cairo with their Western attitudes and did not have a big influence. The workers would not work with them. The Revolutionary Socialists said that they supported the workers, but at the same time they tried to recruit new members. It is not a problem that they came to the strike, but the workers thought that their attitude was opportunistic and that they did not really support their cause.*¹¹³²

RS militant Hossam al-Hamalawy, for his part, called the Socialist Horizons Center of the ECP a "...corrupting force in the left. They don't have any influence: they take a youth from a demo and call him a strike leader."¹¹³³

Of more interest than mutual accusations of sectarianism is the self-criticism of some leftists. Wael Tawfiq, for example, acknowledged that:

All the political powers did it. It was a reality and all the people saw it. The most important thing was that they didn't calculate the moment and the power of the movement. Any start of any strike, if it is big or small, the most important thing is to support it; to organize it and to push it forward: especially because of the low consciousness, the low level of political ideas of the workers and the Egyptian street and the lack of organization. All of this created this outcome: it made the struggle fail. All these movements did not become organized because of the attitude of the political organizations. The biggest political powers in the strikes had only one or

¹¹³⁰ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹¹³¹ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

¹¹³² Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹¹³³ Conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009.

two members and said "it is our struggle!" because of their numbers. At the same time, their members didn't work to make substitution leaders or to organize the factories.

*There was a big struggle between the political forces, criticizing each other, trying to win members and elements from the strike instead of supporting it. There were a lot of documents distributed that created a lot of conflict; each political organization had its own text that conflicted with the others... A lot of political organizations treated the Mahalla movement as a launch pad for a new workers' movement and they didn't treat it as what it really was : a big strike.*¹¹³⁴

*Every organization that had the idea of making a trade union began to say: "we have won three or four worker leaders: we will start from them and build a new organization." And this destroyed the idea.*¹¹³⁵

Tagammu activist Ahmed Belal was of the same opinion:

*The problem of the Mahalla movement today is the problem of the competition between leftists. When the strikes happened I said that all leftists should work together as comrades and support the workers. This did not happen. The activists of the leftist parties joined the movement as activists of their party and they tried to recruit workers' leaders for their party. We let the workers' leaders alone in Mahalla, while they tried to recruit them. The last years there were no strikes because each leftist faction has taken one worker leader each. We should support the movement, not try to lead it in the place of the workers' leaders themselves. Now the leaders are divided and they compete against each other and this destroys the movement.*¹¹³⁶

Gihan Shabeen of the Socialist Renewal Current (SRC) admitted that the assistance of the RS had not always been beneficial to the development of the strike movement: "We analyzed our involvement in the strike as sectarian. Our activists were issuing very high demands and were splitting the movement. They were not issuing the demands that regrouped the movement and unified the movement, making it succeed."¹¹³⁷ Whereas RS leader Mustafa Bassiouny claimed that: "During the Mahalla strike we profited more than any other political power. We recruited more than any other one active in the labor movement. We believe that the resurgence of the workers

¹¹³⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, October 16, 2010.

¹¹³⁵ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, October 20, 2010.

¹¹³⁶ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

¹¹³⁷ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

class creates opportunities for all leftist and progressive forces,” he also acknowledged that: “...the struggle for small party profits will destroy the labor movement.”¹¹³⁸

Political “sectarianism” and “opportunism” were expressions of two fundamental problems that the Left faced with regard to its assistance in the building of a worker Subject. The first issue was the balance between party building and the development of the strike activity-system. Without an organizational apparatus and “center” of some sort, political activists were not able to assist the proletarian Project in an effective way. These “institutional” forms were to a large extent shaped in articulation with the development of political movements and economic struggles. Without an influx of new intellectuals and the formation of instruments to connect, project, and express the workers’ struggle, the Left would not have been able to play its important part in developing the proletarian activity-system. This attitude was a political answer to those intellectuals such as Samir al-Fayyad who did not recognize a role for external actors in the workers’ movement. Yet, the criticisms of worker leaders and leftist activists pointed towards a *Selbstzweck*¹¹³⁹ of the apparatus. Political activists “recuperated” and “used” the labor movement; “gained” something from it and “reaped its benefits”; conceived the workers “as a means to take off” and a pool to “recruit new members”. Rather than political mediations of the workers’ movement, leftist groups became ends-in-themselves, considering the workers as a means to develop their own apparatus instead of proletarian Subjectness. This resulted in “opportunism” and “competition”, a “division” and “corruption” of the movement, and an “illusion of support”. This form of political sectarianism was clearly the result of a commodifying mode of assistance and its antidote, as I explain below, was solidarity.

However, political sectarianism was not always an expression of a commodifying mode of assistance. The second problem was a miscalculation of the “proletarian zone of proximal development”, as I argue below. This political pathology was indicated by such intuitions that activists “did not calculate the moment and the power of the movement”, that they treated the strikes as “a launch pad for a new workers’ movement”, and that they didn’t treat the Mahalla activity-system “as what it really was: a big strike”. These notions articulated a

¹¹³⁸ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Cairo, 12 October 2010.

¹¹³⁹ The tendency towards bureaucratization of an institutionalized social movement. See Michels’ determinist interpretation of an “iron law of oligarchy”. (Michels 2012)

discussion within the Left on the potential trajectory of the Mahalla movement at that time: could the strike Project develop into a trade unionist movement, or even into a political formation, and what role could and should leftists play in stimulating these lines of development?

Solidarity

The solidary mode of assistance stands in opposition to both the colonizing and commodifying relations because it approaches the Subject that it assists as an end in itself and considers its own agency as a scaffold for the autonomous development of the other activity-system. The Other becomes the primary object of the activity of the Self. Furthermore, the solidary Subject offers its assistance under the directions and conditions of the Other. Solidarity can be perceived as an activity in its own right. “Intra-class” solidarity between different instances of class struggle is a first step to overcome the spatio-temporal fragmentation of the worker activity-system. As I have discussed in the chapter on the development of the Mahalla strikes, spontaneous actions in solidarity with the workers imagined a proletarian unity that was not yet institutionalized. Solidarity actions projected the workers as a class and a force in society. Solidarity united the different moments of the Strike into one co-present, yet still decentralized Subjectivity. Once the solidary actions are “institutionalized” – in the sense that they acquire a coherence, an apparatus and a “center” – they become a proletarian collaborative Project, a system of activity by and for workers.

Secondly, solidarity creates the possibility of an “inter-class” shared activity system between, on the one hand, organic and traditional intellectuals, and, on the other, between workers and other subaltern actors such as fellow citizens, farmers, slum dwellers, the deprived middle classes, students, et cetera. The systematization and “institutionalization” of inter-class solidarity leads to the formation of a united front or historic bloc between subaltern forces.

A key concept in the development of a solidary system of activity is **trust**. Andy Blunden explained that: *“New trust between strangers comes out of participating together in a common project. So the qualification is that before I can expect that we will decide together what we do, first off, “you decide what I can do to help*

you.””¹¹⁴⁰ For the workers in Mahalla, trust and reciprocity were already embedded in their pre-Strike activity as workers:

*We spend eight hours every day together. It's more than the time we spend at home. We are all together. Christians and Muslims. At work, we are like a family. We eat together. If my Christian colleague needs some money, we make a collection. Maybe his son needs money to go to hospital. It's not important if it's for a Muslim or Christian.*¹¹⁴¹

The Mahalla strikes expanded the relations of trust from within the workplace to, on the one hand, the local community, and, on the other, other companies.

Mahalla was a city of working class families, who participated in the strike movement and acquired proletarian Subjectivities. *“It was war and the workers and the citizens were on the same side,”*¹¹⁴² Sayyid Habib recalled. *“When a worker or his family went out to buy bread for the strikers and the vendor knew that it was to support the strike, he often refused to take money.”*¹¹⁴³

Throughout the 1980s the embedding of worker Subjects within the particular activity-systems of cities such as Mahalla al-Kubra and Helwan, and within the national context of the moral economy, had “communalized” the class protests rather than “proletarianized” the communities.¹¹⁴⁴ Sam Moore observed that: *“...community is not a substitute for the class basis of union organisation and cannot of itself generate class politics or consciousness, although it can inform and strengthen this through a dynamic relationship which may transform both.”*¹¹⁴⁵ The radicalization of labor protests in the 1990s and 2000s in reaction to the neoliberal State offensive began to reverse the dynamic of “communalization”. Instead of absorbing worker Subjectivities into communal practices and identities, the community assisted the strike movement in a solidary way. The development of the Mahalla strikes between 2006 and 2008 interpellated the citizens of the local community as solidary participants in the worker activity-system. Before the Mahalla strikes, industrial actions:

¹¹⁴⁰ Blunden 2004b.

¹¹⁴¹ Wedad al-Demerdesch in Bocchialini and Gazwy 2012.

¹¹⁴² Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴⁴ DuBoc 2009.

¹¹⁴⁵ Moore 2011: 141.

*...had been strictly local — there had never been an attempt at any industrial action on a national scale. That was in part because surveillance was so tight that workers only organized strikes with those they knew and trusted, who lived next door to them, close by the factory. They lacked the confidence necessary for national strikes, because they could not extend the same trust to workers from other neighbourhoods or provinces.*¹¹⁴⁶

The victory of the Mahalla workers, the emulation of their strikes by other workers, and the solidarity campaigns created new bonds of trust between workers. Traditional intellectuals played an important part in organizing these forms of intra-class solidarity. Their role was recognized by labor leaders such as Sayyid Habib: “...there was a real solidarity movement from some parties and political trends and some students from Tanta university... Also the CTUWS, some members in Tagammu and some journalists from *al-Dustur* and *al-Badil*.”¹¹⁴⁷ Before any proleptic instruction can take place, the instructor has to be recognized as a genuine participant in a shared activity-system. However, workers did not easily acknowledge political actors external to their activity-system as genuine allies. Sayyid Habib commented:

*The political trends and the intellectuals have to be more close to the workers and the people if they want to make a general strike... They have to grasp our way of living. The awareness of the workers is low. Political leaders have to speak the same language of the people. They don't want to go to the workers but they want the workers to go to them. That's why the political trends and the workers are far from each other.*¹¹⁴⁸

Political activists had to prove themselves as solidary actors: “You must be present in the strike and make sure that the workers trust you.”¹¹⁴⁹ Because the Mahalla community was already in solidarity with the workers, political activists who were part of this community could more easily gain the trust of the strikers. Ahmed Belal clarified: “Political activity for me in Mahalla is easy, because I struggle together with the people from my community, not only with statements, but by joining their demonstration and by speaking with them every day. Our comrades in Mahalla are

¹¹⁴⁶ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹¹⁴⁷ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Cairo, 12 November 2010.

¹¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁴⁹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

also our friends.”¹¹⁵⁰ The part that *Tagammu* activists such as Ahmed Belal and Muhammad Fathi were able to play in the strike movement flowed directly from their integration as citizens into the Mahalla community.

For actors outside an already existing shared activity-system it was more difficult to present themselves as genuine participants. Abir Mehdawi explained that: *“Only through activism, people accept our otherness after a while, e.g. people started to accept me as a smoking woman when I helped them... and after a while we even could talk about communism.”*¹¹⁵¹ Wael Tawfiq elaborated upon his own experiences of forging bonds of trust with workers:

*In 2004 in Ghazl al-Lib, we started to work four months before the strike. Those four months we were working to build the minds of the people and to raise their consciousness and to organize them and to make them strong against the government and because of this work before the strike, the strike continued for two months as a good strike, and this became the longest strike in Egypt for a working factory... Working in the strike before it actually starts is the most important thing. I remember that the workers said that “we want to make the strike tomorrow” and I said “no we should wait and prepare ourselves”. We didn’t win even four people from the strike, but it had a big impact on all the other strikes. There was a strong relationship between the workers and us. You must be present in the strike and make sure that the workers trust you.*¹¹⁵²

With regard to the formation of the RETAU, Mustafa Bassiouny explicated that:

*The RS was best connected to this movement, but the leader of the movement was Kamal Abu al-Eita, a member of al-Karama. We had a clear agreement between RS and him: we will support the strike and the union to become independent from the government and us, al-Karama and RS. Our role is just to support it. Since 2007 we are cooperating on this idea: to support and not to influence. Kamal Abu al-Eita said in an important interview that the RS was the best force in the struggle and that the RS created the union; we, however, said no: it was the workers struggle and it is their union.*¹¹⁵³

Establishing a relation of trust between traditional intellectuals and workers was realized by “going to the workers”, standing “side by side”, “struggling together”, “be present”, “grasping their way of living”, “to support and not to

¹¹⁵⁰ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 6 April 2009.

¹¹⁵¹ Interview with Abir Mehdawi, Cairo, 13 April 2009.

¹¹⁵² Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹¹⁵³ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Cairo, 12 October 2010.

influence”, and “being close to the people and tell them the truth”¹¹⁵⁴. “We are not taking any decisions for the workers movement. If the movement has a bad decision we will support them even if we see it’s a bad decision,”¹¹⁵⁵ pledged Mustafa Bassiouny. In order for assistance to be solidary, it had to be unconditional, honest, and oriented towards the development of the assisted Subject: “...people start to organise themselves and journalists and left-wing movements help them, but not in a patronizing way. They stand side by side with the people and listen to their questions and help them.”¹¹⁵⁶

The political deontology of selfless and honest support created bonds of trust, which, in turn, facilitated a solidary mode of assistance. Within the shared system of solidarity a collaborative Project may develop between non-proletarian and proletarian actors, provided that they establish a dialectical pedagogy: a process of reciprocal learning that pushes forward the development of the Subjectness of all actors involved. Assistance must be *solidary* if it is really to be *genuine*. Yet assistance must also be *instructive* to the development of the Subject if it is to be *relevant*. This begs the question of the ZPD of the Egyptian workers’ movement before the 25 January Revolution. What types of assistance accelerated or retarded the development of the worker Subject?

¹¹⁵⁴ Interview with Abir Mehdawi, Cairo, 13 April 2009.

¹¹⁵⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Cairo, 12 October 2010.

¹¹⁵⁶ Interview with Abir Mehdawi, Cairo, 13 April 2009.

CHAPTER 18

The Proletarian ZPD

The political movement only touched the social movement: there was not a strong connection yet. The political activists went too fast, raising the idea of a strike in the whole country, which was not possible at that moment.

Fatma Ramadan, labor leader, Interview, Cairo, 11 October 2010

Development-oriented Instruction

Whereas solidarity is a necessary condition for the creation of an authentic and reciprocal relation of learning between workers and non-proletarian actors – a dialectical pedagogy – in itself it does not guarantee an instructive process that advances the development of the worker Subject. Vygotsky argued that instruction only leads to development when it stimulates the maturation of the central neoformation of a Subject at a certain point in its sociogenesis. There is only so much distance a Subject can cross between its actual and potential development, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), within one developmental line. With regard to the formation of proletarian Subjectness, its ZPD depends on its current Social Situation of Development (SSoD), and on the actual “moment” within its whole developmental process. Instructors, who can be either “internal peers” (organic intellectuals) or “external teachers” (traditional intellectuals), have to focus their efforts on elaborating those functions that allow the Subject to develop itself within and from a given SSoD. Instruction that moves “behind” or too far “ahead of” development is either irrelevant or counterproductive. For example, while the *telos* of a revolutionary replacement of the bourgeois State with workers’ democracy may perhaps be “true” for the proletariat at any time, it remains a purely abstract truth as long as this object cannot be related to the concrete spatio-temporal developmental level of the worker activity-system. This does not mean that worker sociogenesis and emancipation can be reduced to a linear scheme of preset stages, but that, for each concrete moment, there is a “zone” that delineates possibilities and constraints of further development depending on the actual circumstances. In other words, a particular discursive or organizational neoformation might advance the

development of the workers' movement at one point in its trajectory, but retard it at another.

With regard to the Mahalla strike movement, the discussion about the ZPD of the Egyptian workers was not a purely theoretical analysis brought from without, for both organic worker leaders and traditional intellectuals were continuously debating the possible directions, capacities, and goals of the developing worker Subject. From this perspective, political "sectarianism" consisted of those forms of instruction that transgressed the "upper" limit of the ZPD of the movement, projecting the working class in a potential moment of their emancipatory trajectory that was too far ahead of their actual developmental level. Conversely, forms of instruction that remained "below" the "lower" limit of the ZPD of the movement acted as a brake on the development of the activity-system. These forms of assistance could be useful, of course, but *from the perspective of the development of the Subject* they were not productive.

Independent Trade Unionism

Almost all political actors, and especially those from the Left, agreed that: *"The purpose for all of us is to participate in the basic union committees in the factories and on the site. But the highest and biggest union organizations are controlled by the government through the Ministry and the Security."*¹¹⁵⁷ Even though the GFETU was a bureaucratic pillar of the regime, local factory committees often offered a field of work for organic intellectuals of the working class. However, the success of the Mahalla strike committees and the formation of the RETAU in 2008 raised the question of the possibility of an institutionalized independent trade unionism in the societal context of the Egyptian working class.

Some organic and traditional intellectuals recognized only the potential of a marginal development of the worker Subject; as long as there was no real democracy in the national political sphere, a free, independent, and democratic trade union was unattainable. State repression, exemplified in the 6 April uprising, rendered the idea of any large scale and independent workers' movement within the framework of the Mubarak dictatorship unfeasible. With this episode in mind, Muslim Brotherhood leader Said Husayni claimed that:

¹¹⁵⁷ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

*The Muslim Brotherhood published a statement that we are supporting the right of strike for workers. We are with the Egyptian people. But at the same time we said that this is not the right movement to make change against the regime, because (1) it's a hard dictatorship. The regime will use all ways to defend itself; and (2) the world regime won't support a revolution at this moment, as our government supports Israel. So a general strike will not succeed at the moment, but perhaps in the future.*¹¹⁵⁸

Leftist labor leaders and activists disagreed about the possibility of independent trade unionism in the Mubarak era. Helmi Sha'rawi of the AARC claimed that:

*Up to now we can say that the consciousness of the working class is not yet strongly trade unionist... The great issue for Marxist trade unionists is to either create new unions or fight within the existing trade union. In the movement you will find those who are pushing for independent unions. Of course we agree with this principle, but in the current atmosphere it will be very weak: how will you collect your contribution or shares and so on. How? It is not allowed under the emergency law that you are living under.*¹¹⁵⁹

Abdel Rashid Hilal, a senior worker leader in *Tagammu*, emphasized that workers and their strikes had to be oriented towards "...a political-democratic goal" as "...the independent union will not come without democracy" and while "...*Tagammu* aims to have a union that solves the social problems of the workers, until this happens, *Tagammu* will struggle to create new tools to fix it."¹¹⁶⁰ He rejected the possibility of a straightforward emulation of the RETAU experience in other workplaces:

*There won't be a new example like the union of the tax workers. It was a group with the same aim. Their leaders had a political view. They wanted to change the salary system. It's hard to make independent union, like the tax workers' union, because the government does not recognize it as a real union and the regime will not negotiate with them. The international labor unions are recognizing these independent unions but here they are not recognized [by the regime]. So we have to make our own local small committees in the government union so we can have the independent union step by step. Otherwise the government will not recognize it: it won't be a real union. We can't work in the government unions unless the workers have a political perspective and unity. And that is what *Tagammu* wants to do: to organize the workers around one goal and one interest and give them political ideas*

¹¹⁵⁸ Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹⁵⁹ Interview with Helmi Sha'rawi, Giza, 11 November 2010.

¹¹⁶⁰ Interview with Abd al-Rashid Hilal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

*and make small committees in the unions. Then we can gather all these small committees to make an independent union.*¹¹⁶¹

The formation of independent trade unions would be a slow and time-consuming “bottom-up” process, without any shortcuts: *“It is easier for the workers’ movement to fill a gap where there are no existing union organisations than it is to displace existing bureaucratic unions that are opposed to the workers’ movement.”*¹¹⁶² Baho Abdul of Tadamon argued that the formation of the RETAU had been a fringe development and did not represent the main trajectory for the whole Egyptian worker Subject:

*It’s too soon for an independent union, because people don’t yet understand what it means: they don’t yet have the experience to run a union. Besides, the government will never accept it. They accept the tax collectors’ union because it isn’t a big threat to them. I am of course in favor of the organization of the workers, but a real union needs money and legitimacy before it can work.*¹¹⁶³

The orientation towards the working class and the attitude towards independent trade unions were one of the main reasons for the split of the SRC from the RS in 2010.¹¹⁶⁴ According to Gihan Shabeen:

*The main problem was that of the independent unions. We said that it was not enough to talk about independency because that is a merely democratic demand, but it is also necessary to build the union from below and to make it completely democratic, and that this was not the time to talk about independent unions for workers, we had to look at every place, and see how they can and want to organize themselves, even if they want to organize themselves legally. The issue is to organize themselves, or making small groups to do whatever necessary, not talking about independent unions.*¹¹⁶⁵

Tadamon and SRC leader Fatma Ramadan explicated that:

In fact we are not pushing for the workers to form independent unions and committees. We are looking at the facts on the ground: the conditions for the workers are not good to form independent trade unions on their own. The workers are on the defensive and the government is defending the State trade union, so

¹¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁶² Bassiouny and Omar 2007.

¹¹⁶³ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 10 May 2009.

¹¹⁶⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

¹¹⁶⁵ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

until the workers unite and take a stand, it is not a good moment to create independent trade unions.

Now it's not the independent trade union era, but the workers need organization, however you call it: a committee, a trade union. Everyone in a factory should be organized in a committee. Step by step the workers will join, but even in Mahalla where they had the biggest strike, if the leaders would call their members to establish an independent union they would be isolated.¹¹⁶⁶

Likewise the CTUWS, which had played an important role in the Egyptian workers' movement from the 1990s on, was unwilling to turn the Mahalla strikes into the vanguard of independent trade unionism, and it came increasingly into conflict with political forces such as the Revolutionary Socialists that advocated this kind of development.¹¹⁶⁷ RS leaders argued that the emergence of the RETAU had demonstrated the possibility of independent trade unionism in Egypt and that the efforts of political activists should be focused on strengthening the emerging trade union structures as they constituted the leading neoformations of the contemporary moment in the trajectory of the workers' movement. Mustafa Bassiouny explained that:

...the workers are ready when they are ready. We can't say that a movement with strikes and demonstrations and demands can't have an independent trade union – because in practice they were already operating as an independent trade union. In Mahalla in September 2006 the workers chose 25 workers for them to negotiate. They organized strikes and were bringing food for 20,000 strike members. There were a lot of hard times, I saw it myself. And a lot of times I thought the strike was going to be finished. If that was not a trade union, what is then a real trade union? The labor movement showed it was ready. If the workers are ready we must be ready too. And if they aren't ready, we should not ignore them and say "oh they are not ready for our ideas"...

Before the independent tax union a lot of activists were afraid of this idea. The example of the tax workers will help other workers. We believe that the workers movement is much stronger now.¹¹⁶⁸

¹¹⁶⁶ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

¹¹⁶⁷ Beinun and al-Hamalawy 2007b; conversation with Hossam al-Hamalawy, Cairo, 14 May 2009; conversation with Sarah Carr, Cairo, 15 April 2009.

¹¹⁶⁸ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

Khaled Ali of the ECESR agreed with vanguard role of the RETAU, but was a little more cautious and pessimistic towards the future:

Right now the future is blurred and actually the labor movement has taken many steps but I don't think these steps will allow it to take its full rights in the future. I don't think this will lead to concrete success, unless the movement will be able to organize itself. The only strong organization in Egypt for workers is the GFETU. This is the only organization in Egypt, but the workers themselves do not have such an organization. Until this moment they are not able to get full worker rights. To do this they have to organize themselves like the real estate tax collector workers. They have made a trade union and it is faced now with a harsh fight, but the workers need to organize themselves like this... I hope this will happen. Actually the real estate trade union is confronted with many difficulties and hard measures against it and pressure to abort it. I hope, but I don't think they will be able to continue.¹¹⁶⁹

Sabr Barakat claimed that activists should:

...push the workers more and more to the way of their own independent unions. Away from the government and the governmental trade union organizations... And I think workers in Egypt are near to snatching their own union... The strikes are a tool to obtain the independent unions. The end solution is: independent unions. But the union organization itself is a tool to get our rights and to protect them. And to further develop the labor rights.¹¹⁷⁰

Talal Shukr elucidated that some members of the *Tagammu* labor committee had always looked favorably on the formation of new trade unions:

We have encouraged the workers to create their own, independent union, with their own ways, far from the regime union. Tagammu was with the independent movement and supported the demand for a new union. Already in 2001 we had a committee in the party to steer workers towards the idea of an independent movement.¹¹⁷¹

Mahalla workers such as Wael Abu Zaid wanted to follow the example of the RETAU workers: “We struggle for a new trade union, because the union now is very weak and doesn't support the workers. Our next step is to go to court to establish our

¹¹⁶⁹ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

¹¹⁷⁰ Interview with Sabr Barakat, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹¹⁷¹ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

independent union. Then we'll create a general committee for the new union."¹¹⁷² Sayyid Habib elaborated upon their attempts to form an independent trade union:

We collected 14,000 signatures against the union and we have 1,200 signatures to stop the Mahalla membership in the GFETU. Now we want to make an independent trade union and we plan to make this now especially since the GFETU wants to delay the elections of the syndicates with one year. We want an independent union just as the tax union in Cairo.

We try to collect the workers who are members of the trade union assembly. The members of this assembly are all the workers in Mahalla al-Kubra. Before we withdrew our confidence but the trade union ignored it. We will not withdraw our confidence again, but we will collect these members to create an independent union.

There are no big problems in the tax trade union, only problems between the trade union and the GFETU because of the government. The tax workers went to the Labor Ministry and gave them the papers and documents. There are also people from the ILO here in Cairo and they gave them the same documents and papers. According to the law if the Ministry does not answer after 30 days the union is legal. In Mahalla we will do the same. We will go with our documents to the Labor Ministry and send it to the ILO. This will mean that we have an independent union like the tax workers...

*If we cared for the emergency law we couldn't do anything. Our strikes were illegal under emergency law. After this all kinds of workers made their strikes, even the employees of the government.*¹¹⁷³

In conclusion, the discussion between 2008 and 2011 about independent trade unionism was not *whether* to support independent worker strikes or committees or not, but to *what extent* the institutionalization of these grassroots struggles was possible within the ZPD of the movement. Whereas some organic and traditional intellectuals argued that the demand for an independent trade union advanced the development of the worker Subject, others conjectured that this goal transgressed the "upper" boundaries of the ZPD of the worker Project at that time.

¹¹⁷² Interview with Wael Abu Zaid, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹⁷³ Interview with Sayyid Habib, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

Political Subjectivities

A second debate involved the margins of the politicization of the movement. Within the Left there was a consensus that the separation between social and political demands and movements constituted the main obstacle for the formation of a social and political force that would be able to challenge the regime. *Tagammu* activist Ahmed Belal observed that:

*The situation in Egypt changes every day. Now a lot of people start to demand their rights, not only workers, but also judges, doctors, pharmacists, bakers, farmers... a lot of people now start to demand their rights. But they do not demand anything political up until now. They just demand their rights. For example, the engineers want to have an independent syndicate. Doctors: the same. Workers: the same; they want a bonus, salary, et cetera. But no one calls for political demands.*¹¹⁷⁴

Tagammu leader Husayn Abd al-Razik claimed that:

*These protests are important, but they can't change the political situation in Egypt. They have no political orientation. They only address immediate social and economic problems. Every group fends for itself and the government attempts to buy off the different sections and layers. And when movements have a political character, they lack organisation. So there are political organisations without a social base, and social movements without a political organisation. No political party has a real connection to the common people.*¹¹⁷⁵

Al-Karama journalist Tareq Said was of the same opinion:

*The big problem in Egypt is the separation between political and social actions. When political activists do action, social activists disappear, when social activists do action political activists disappear. There will only be change in Egypt when the two unite. A lot of people in Egypt don't care about freedom or democracy, they care about their salaries, their living, how to raise their children. When people understand change will happen only connected to politics, then change will happen.*¹¹⁷⁶

Some organic and traditional intellectuals were pessimistic about the politicization of the workers' movement and did not recognize any space for the entwinement of political and social demands in the ZPD of the worker Subject

¹¹⁷⁴ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 6 April 2009.

¹¹⁷⁵ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

¹¹⁷⁶ Interview with Tareq Said, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

during the Mubarak era. Mahalla worker Faysal Lakusha, himself a NDP-member, claimed that: *“If we will say that we are supported by political parties, the government will attack us, both the workers and the parties.”*¹¹⁷⁷ His colleague Abdul Kader asserted that: *“...we see our demands as labor demands, not as political demands... If we give labor demands a political form we won't succeed. In other circumstances, for example against our union, these demands become political.”*¹¹⁷⁸ Talal Shukr explained that:

Workers don't want politics to interfere in their work. When the workers organize a movement, the government treats them kindly, when political parties enter to control the movement, the government reacts very strongly. So the workers want to be independent from the parties...

*They only want to raise their salary and standard of living. Maybe in the future there will be a combination of political and syndical actions, but this will take several years. Some political movements use the workers for their own objectives. The workers fear politics, they just want to reach their objectives, like salaries etc. We must wait: in the near future they will understand the relation between the economic and the politics. They will understand the necessity of making this connection.*¹¹⁷⁹

Other activists stressed both the necessity and possibility of politicizing the movement. Helmi Sha'rawi advocated a “stagist” approach to politicization: *“At least in the beginning you should help crystallize the demand,, the social economic demands: then you can call the workers of Egypt to protest against this and that policy.”*¹¹⁸⁰ Al-Badil editor Medhat al-Zahed emphasized the reciprocal relation between political and social activism as mutually reinforcing activities: political groups should incorporate trade unionist demands and social movements should develop a political perspective.¹¹⁸¹ Tagammu activist Muhammad Fathi asserted the need for a *political* intervention of leftists in the workers' movement:

The general direction of Tagammu is one of support for the workers, only the demands of the workers, giving no political direction at all. But here however, in

¹¹⁷⁷ Interview with Faysal Lakusha, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹⁷⁸ Interview with Abdul Kader, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹⁷⁹ Interview with Talal Shukr, Cairo, 21 April 2009.

¹¹⁸⁰ Interview with Helmi Sha'rawi, Giza, 11 November 2010.

¹¹⁸¹ Ibid.

*Mahalla, we give them a political perspective. We hope that we convince the members of Tagammu next year to have a political perspective for the workers.*¹¹⁸²

Tagammu labor leader Abd al-Rashid Hilal argued that the role of leftists was precisely the politicization of the workers' struggles:

*The workers took the first step and then the political organizations came to speak their discourse. The translation of this movement in a pro-democratic movement is the responsibility of political activists such as Tagammu workers in the committee. They have the task to move these strikes towards a political-democratic goal.*¹¹⁸³

However, such an interventionist attitude ran the risk of simply colonizing the workers' struggle for the civil-democratic movement, as discussed in the previous chapter. Hisham Fouad observed that:

*There is often an attempt to politicize the movement without developing the demands of the movement itself. One should wait until the movement reaches a good level before turning it into a political one. When there are no labor unions or labor parties there is an absence that we cannot fill. We only have a little number of activists. We should support the workers' demands themselves. Through this process the workers' aims are developed, and they develop into an independent group and from there they start to form demands that relate to the society at large, for example the demand of the minimum wage. Through the process of creating groups like this they will develop their demands from an immediate, low state to a higher form. On the other hand, they are facing a huge enemy. This enemy has to be conquered first and only then you can pose higher demands.*¹¹⁸⁴

The Mahalla strikes, for the first time since the 1970s, and perhaps even the 1950s, "...had the potential of relating the social to the political domain."¹¹⁸⁵ Mahalla workers began to connect their local, particular struggle to the domination and exploitation inherent in *al-nizam*. However, the experience of the failed 6 April strike showed the devastating effect of a colonizing politicization and a political instruction that went beyond the "upper" limit of the workers' ZPD. Fatma Ramadan explained that:

The political movement only touched the social movement: there was not a strong connection yet. The political activists went too fast, raising the idea of a strike in

¹¹⁸² Interview with Muhammad Fathy, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.

¹¹⁸³ Interview with Abd al-Rashid Hilal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

¹¹⁸⁴ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.

¹¹⁸⁵ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 11 October 2010.

*the whole country, which was not possible at that moment. This made the government use violence against the workers, and they paid some of the workers leaders to side with the government, and the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Manpower and the Minister of Investments went to the workers to grant them some of their demands.*¹¹⁸⁶

Although the Mahalla workers began to develop political Subjectivities, these were all but matured during the 6 April strike of 2008. Furthermore, the central task of this period was still the overcoming of the economic-corporate condition through the building of central neoformations, such as independent strike committees and trade unions. By assisting the workers in a solidary way to develop and institutionalize their strike activities, and helping them to develop their “good sense” into a “philosophy of praxis”, traditional intellectuals were strengthening the civil-democratic movement.

The State and the ZPD

Up until the 25 January Revolution, the ZPD of the Strike in Egypt was determined by the predicament of Mubarak’s neoliberal passive revolution, which propelled workers into action, but at the same time restricted their capacity to systematize its protests.¹¹⁸⁷ The Pharaoh was not a passive obstacle, waiting to be overcome by the workers’ movement, but an active force, which shaped the worker Subject as much as it was transformed by it. *“The process of... elaborating the political self-definition of the working-class movement, is one in which the adversary is inevitably and actively present,”* Alan Shandro sharply remarks.¹¹⁸⁸ The SSoD of the workers was a “contentious space”, *“...a part of the social world built at the same time against and in reference to the political field and its formal institutions.”*¹¹⁸⁹

There is no automatic relation between the development of the working class and its SSoD. The SSoD is not an absolute condition, but a predicament relative to a Subject at a certain point in its development.¹¹⁹⁰ For example, in the 1980s and 1990s the economic predicament of the Egyptian private sector workers went much deeper than that of the state employees, yet they were less likely to protest

¹¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁸⁷ Bassiouny and Omar 2007.

¹¹⁸⁸ Shandro 2001: 230.

¹¹⁸⁹ Vairel 2011: 27.

¹¹⁹⁰ Daniels 2007: 309.

because they were less organized and their situation was more precarious.¹¹⁹¹ While the neoliberal reforms, at first, led to passivity in most private companies, they stimulated resistance in the textile sector. The public sector workers had already developed a degree of Subjectness in the form of collective traditions, memories, methods, leaderships, and discourses. Their class Subjectivity was transformed through the struggle against neoliberal reforms and was moved to a higher plane of Subjectness. Since the working class Subject in the textile sector was more developed than the fragmented Subjectivities in the private factories, it was better prepared to overcome the predicament of neoliberal reform.

However, Jan Romein's "law of the handicap of a head start"¹¹⁹² seemed to rear its head with regard to the development of Subjectness as well. Whilst the Mahalla workers put the concept of the Strike as a tool of securing economic gains and labor rights back on the agenda of the whole Egyptian working class, at the dawn of the 25 January Revolution they were still struggling to fully develop the outcome of the Strike logic: an independent trade union. Class actors in the "periphery" of the workers' movement had already formed their own trade union neoformations: the real estate tax workers; the teachers; the health professionals; and the pensioners. These factions came late but fresh to the scene of social protest. They were not demoralized like the Mahalla workers and because the strike movement had become a shared activity-system, they could immediately import their experiences into their own struggle. Even though the workers' movement had experienced a setback, it continued its slow and gradual development into a more coherent Subject.

Whereas the establishment of independent trade unions had shown the potential development for the whole workers' movement, the crushed Mahalla uprising on 6 April 2008 served as a warning for the industrial "core" of workers not to challenge State power. The extent to which independent and democratic trade unionism was possible in the Mubarak-era, in particular, remained a point of discussion among leftist activists and labor leaders.

¹¹⁹¹ Bassiouny and Omar 2007; Interview with Abdel Rashid Hilal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.

¹¹⁹² See Romein 1980.

Educating the Educators

Dialectical Pedagogy

When the activity of solidarity and proleptic instruction mediates the relation between the worker Subject and non-proletarian actors, a dialectical pedagogy arises: an interpenetration of different types of instruction, which develops the participating Subjects and their shared activity-system. Throughout the Mahalla strike movement, traditional intellectuals pushed the development of the worker Subject forward by their solidary connective, projective and expressive assistance, elevating the worker Subject from its economic-corporate moment to a trade unionist activity-system. Wael Tawfiq was quite explicit in the pedagogical tasks of solidary actors:

*Most leaders in the Mahalla strikes were not in any organization. They were natural leaders, spontaneous. The most important thing before distributing your program is to search and find these leaders and work with them to organize the movement. And work in two ways with them. Firstly, you have to raise their consciousness... Secondly, you have to prepare them to work against the government. This is the real work that must be present in any strike, not only in Mahalla.*¹¹⁹³

In turn, the autoproleptic actions of the working class acted as a heteroleptic magnet on leftist intellectuals. Mustafa Bassiouny contemplated that: *“The long term strikes like in Mahalla gave me a clear image of the daily struggle of the workers and how strikes change the political atmosphere... I learned more from the workers than the other way around.”*¹¹⁹⁴ Baho Abdul stressed that: *“We have much to learn from the natural leaders, especially their discourse and their ways to communicate. That’s why we’ll publish our newspaper in ‘ammiya*¹¹⁹⁵.¹¹⁹⁶

For New Left organizations such as the RS, *Tadamon*, and later the SRC, the active involvement in the workers’ movement led to a political and social transformation. New layers of recruited workers changed the class base of these movements, which were primarily composed of students and middle-class traditional intellectuals. Politically they moved away from purely civil-democratic politics and went “back to class”. Old Left parties such as *Tagammu*

¹¹⁹³ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 October 2010.

¹¹⁹⁴ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 12 October 2010.

¹¹⁹⁵ Colloquial Egyptian Arabic.

¹¹⁹⁶ Interview with Baho Abdul, Cairo, 10 May 2009.

and the ECP continued their disengagement from class politics, but faced increased internal dissent, both from disgruntled leaders organized in factions such as the *Trend for Change*, and local activists who participated in the many social and political movements of the 2000s, such as Ahmed Belal.

However, it would be misleading to present the emergence of a dialectical pedagogy between workers and traditional intellectuals as the defining political relation from 2006 on. On the contrary, most political activists, journalists, artists, et cetera, did not participate in a shared, solidary activity-system with workers and other subaltern classes: even those leftists who assisted subaltern Subjects in solidarity did not automatically become “democratic philosophers”, or constitute a collaborative Project with a goal immanent to their shared activity.

Democratic Philosophers

A solidary mode of assistance constitutes a shared activity between proletarian and non-proletarian actors. This activity-system brings together organic intellectuals *of* and traditional intellectuals *for* the workers’ movement, creating the social field for a dialectical pedagogy: the interpenetration of everyday “good sense” and “scientific” critique. A dialectical pedagogy and its philosophy of praxis is embodied in the “democratic philosopher”, who is either an organic proletarian intellectual – whose good sense is embedded within a coherent theory and a social organization – or a non-proletarian traditional intellectual – whose “scientific” consciousness is grounded into the spontaneous philosophy and activity of the working class. Or, in Medhat al-Zahed’s words:

When people realize their near interests is connected with their strategic interests and when they are conscious as a class – and a class has an attitude towards all matters – the workers will find that it is very important for them to protest privatization of health and so on. Civil society organizations and parties have to make this connection.¹¹⁹⁷

As I discussed before, the solidary activity-system that developed around the Mahalla strike movement was built by both old and new generations of organic and traditional intellectuals. Some of these were already “historical” democratic philosophers – labor leaders such as Talal Shukr and Kamal Abu al-Eita – or they

¹¹⁹⁷ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 9 November 2010.

were activists, such as Wael Tawfiq, who became practical-critical philosophers by their participation in the shared system of solidarity.

However, other intellectuals, both organic and traditional, did not develop a philosophy of praxis through solidary activity. They either remained “stuck” in their everyday or scientific modes of consciousness, or they developed a hybrid or even schizophrenic pedagogy and consciousness. For example, in Dikirnis, a small village near Mansura, the *Tagammu* branch had been at the forefront of the resistance of farmers, who tried to safeguard their lands against the encroachment of the local landlords. When I arrived in Dikirnis, Mahmud Foda – the secretary of *Tagammu* for Mansura who lives in the village – and three farmers – Hagga Zeki, Said Abd al-Mali and Ahmed Rashil – awaited me. They informed me about the self-organization of the farmers and their occupation of the lands that the landlords tried to take away from them. Together with other leftist factions and parties, *Tagammu* members supported and organized the farmers, whilst articulating their grievances in the national media and the parliament. On the local level, the activists stood up against the Muslim Brothers and the *Wafd* party, which supported the right of the landlords to reclaim their lands. Mahmud Foda denounced the *Wafd* as a party that defended the interests of landlords and capitalists. Yet, when we talked about national politics, his rhetoric changed. As a proponent of the “democracy first” strategy, the *Tagammu* secretary emphasized the need to create a broad electoral front against the regime, including all secular and democratic forces. “Including the *Wafd*?” I asked. “Including the *Wafd*,” he answered. When I asked Foda how he would convince the farmers present of voting for a coalition between *Tagammu* and the *Wafd*, he claimed that, due to the dictatorship, “*Egyptian political activists have to work in a narrow framework*”.¹¹⁹⁸

This anecdote illustrated the possibility of unresolved contradictions between social Subjectivities within the microcosm of the political actor. Mahmud Foda supported the struggling farmers against their class enemies, reinforcing their activity-system with connective, projective and expressive assistance. At the local level, he was a genuine participant in a grassroots activity-system of solidarity. Yet, in the same conversation, he defended a broad democratic front with the peasants’ sworn class enemies – a Subjectivity which was born from the

¹¹⁹⁸ Interview with Mahmud Foda, Hagga Zeki, Said Abd al-Mali and Ahmed Rashil, Dikirnis, 17 April 2009.

colonizing logic of the Old Left that democratic change should precede structural social reforms; i.e. a stage theory of class struggle. The Mubarak dictatorship warranted the strategy of “democracy first” in the national sphere, which, ironically, could only exist alongside forms of class politics in the local sphere *because* of the isolation of national politics from the street, and *because* of the separation of political and social struggle. Foda’s “bottom-up” experience of solidary assistance to the struggle of the farmers did not reconstruct his “top-down” political theory. Nor did his democratic stagism prevent him from supporting the peasants. There was no organic connection between these two lines of politico-conceptual development.

Likewise, in the national-political sphere, worker leader Faysal Lakusha remained loyal to the NDP and the Mubarak State, despite his everyday struggle against the agents of its passive revolution in the shape of police, thugs, and factory management. Similarly, *Tagammu* activist Muhammad Fathi clung to the theory that there was no “real” class struggle in Egypt as long as there was no genuine bourgeois democracy and developed capitalism, while he actively participated in the everyday reality of the Mahalla strikes.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to advance an exhaustive explanation for these hybrid forms of political consciousness, of which the particularity is constructed by the intellectual trajectories of the individual activists. However, it is clear that, in general, the development of the workers’ movement as an independent¹¹⁹⁹ social Subject was as much restricted by its own ZPD as by the ZPD of its “educators” – the Left. In the 2000s the Egyptian Left, like the workers’ movement, was fragmented and in the process of reconstructing itself. By establishing shared systems of activity, the civil-democratic and workers’ movements “educated” leftists as much as they “educated” these formations. Through their engagement with the workers’ struggles, leftists advanced various conceptions of the developmental level of the workers’ movement. However, the same held true for the workers who evaluated the capacity of the Left to offer directive, technical and cultural assistance – and often found the existing leftist parties and organizations wanting. For example, Nagwan Soleiman of the SLCHR claimed that the lack of politicization of the workers’ movement was not due to a “hard” upper limit of its ZPD, but because of the organizational weakness of the

¹¹⁹⁹ In the sense of not being subsumed and subjugated under another Subject.

political field. The necessity of a phase of proletarian “trade unionism” before *hizbiyya* or “partyism” owed as much to the underdevelopment of the Left as it was a consequence of the workers’ economic-corporate predicament:

*The problem is in the politics, with the political activists and the civil activists. Before the political activists start to organize the workers they should start organize themselves. Later on they can agree on a certain agenda on how to interact with the labor movement. But the labor movement will not be developed into a political movement without this.*¹²⁰⁰

In order to successfully halt Mubarak’s passive revolution and reconfigure the neoliberal bloc, workers, leftists and other subaltern classes had to create a counter-hegemonic bloc, which, in turn, necessitated the construction of counter-hegemonic apparatuses and class alliances. Unsurprisingly, because of the fragmentation of the subaltern classes and of the Left, there was no consensus on the composition and character of this bloc.

¹²⁰⁰ Interview with Nagwan Suleiman, Giza, 26 October 2010.

CHAPTER 19

Roads to Counter-Hegemony

Democracy is not a matter of elites, but it is the way you organize people to defend their interests.

Democracy is a matter of the deprived people. The bourgeoisie only fights for a share of the cake.

Democracy is not a matter of making this or that statement, but it needs a grassroots social and material base. The traditions and experiences of the workers' movement are crucial in establishing this base.

Medhat al-Zahed, senior editor of al-Badil, Interview, Cairo, 8 April 2009

Shapes of the Prince

The construction of the neoliberal bloc and its passive revolution throughout the 1990s and 2000s forced leftists to look for roads to develop a counter-hegemonic Project. Medhat al-Zahed summarized the main obstacles of the formation of a counter-hegemonic bloc as follows:

The problem of the political field in Egypt is twofold: (1) it is fragmented and must be united; (2) there is a divide between political activism and social movements. The petit-bourgeois trends and lack of experience form obstacles for the development of a political alternative. A good strategy, formulating suitable demands, et cetera, is fundamental for the movement.¹²⁰¹

The main predicament for the Left, i.e. its “vertical” and “horizontal” fragmentation, mirrored the economic-corporate condition of the subaltern classes that it sought to emancipate. In order to overcome its own fragmentation as a Subject, leftists had to create shared systems of activity with other leftists and with subaltern actors. As I discussed before, leftists proposed different strategies to overcome their fragmentation and constitute a counter-hegemonic bloc. These political methodologies were rooted in both historical traditions and the realities of contemporary phenomena. They entailed, implicitly or explicitly: (1) a critique of Egypt’s political economy and a proposal for a reconfiguration of base and superstructure relations; (2) a conception of the social force capable of challenging the neoliberal bloc and of its possible and necessary allies; (3) a strategy of dealing with State power; (4) a methodology of building a hegemonic apparatus. Below I

¹²⁰¹ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 8 April 2009.

sketch the three main leftist Projects as archetypes, with the *caveat* that the realities of the political field are evidently much more complex.

A Secular Bloc¹²⁰²

A first form of critique was uttered by the “secular alliance” of rightist *Tagammu* leaders and intellectuals (in the narrow sense). It was largely a “civilizational” critique that considered the growing influence of Islamic puritanism in civil society as a reactionary force in itself. At least the Mubarak dictatorship was *modern*, and its authoritarianism kept grassroots fundamentalist forces in check. Without the protection of a strong “civil” State the rights of women, Copts, and free-spirited Egyptians would be trampled upon. The political Subjectivity of the “secular Left” was not mediated by an engagement in street and workplace politics, but it was derived from their experience with “Islamic fascism” in the 1970s, the renewed Islamist terrorist attacks in the 1990s, and the State’s cultivation of Islamism as “enemy number one”. It was a Subjectivity of fear, retreat, passivity, and helplessness. In the end, the secular alliance did not constitute an emancipatory Project, because it did not develop any notion of the building of a subaltern Prince against the power of the Pharaoh; on the contrary, the powerless “secularists” called on the power of the State as a Savior-Ruler to emancipate them from the danger of Islamism. They were rather subaltern allies within the neoliberal bloc than participants in a counter-hegemonic Project.

The alliance of the “secular Left”, grouped around the State as the main social force, consisted of right-wing *Tagammu* and ECP leaders, liberals, intellectuals (in the narrow sense), and layers of the upper middle classes, who feared to lose their Western lifestyle when Islamists should come to power. The preferred strategy of dealing with State power was to simply embrace it, and cautiously call for democratic reform, until the dictatorship “...*perhaps, retreats*”.¹²⁰³

As the “secular Left” was not a counter-hegemonic force it did not bother to create a counter-hegemonic apparatus, and was content with the restricted legal political spaces granted by the State. It could publish its opinions freely in the media, as long as it did not transgress any of the State’s “red lines”, such as writing negatively about the President. It could freely participate in elections and

¹²⁰² See *Chapter 12 The Civil-Democratic Movement*.

¹²⁰³ Interview with Rifaat al-Said, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

was even given a voice in parliament, as long as this voice was submerged in the noise of the NDP majority. It was allowed to organize meetings in its party headquarters and debate anything, as long as these discussions were not taken to the streets and workplaces. In conclusion, its politics consisted of participation without mobilization, and a (relative) freedom of speech without the freedom to act accordingly.

A Civil-Democratic Bloc

A second critique flowed from the real activity of the civil-democratic movement. Among activists and grassroots leaders of the Old Left, *Kefaya* and its derivatives were hailed as the heirs of “their” historical national-popular counter-blocs. The emergence of the civil-democratic movement out of sustained anti-imperialist protests seemed to vindicate the view that *Kefaya* was the last phase of the anti-colonial struggle that would bring the pro-Zionist and pro-American “comprador” class down. The neoliberal bloc was primarily conceptualized as *foreign political domination*, and its negation, the counter-bloc, as a broad anti-imperialist, democratic coalition that encompassed not only the exploited and oppressed workers, peasants, and middle classes, but also national capitalists. Therefore, leftists with a “stagist” approach to the class struggle, such as *Tagammu* and ECP leaders, advocated the subsumption of subaltern Subjects, such as the workers’ movement, into the counter-bloc.¹²⁰⁴ This constituted a continuation of the historical “colonial mode of assistance” towards the worker Subject.

Conversely, militants of the New Left often saw the emergence of the spontaneous and grassroots civil-democratic movement as the negation of traditional and discredited party politics. Rather than a continuation of the Old Left’s national-popular bloc they envisioned the civil-democratic movement as an authentic form of democratic grassroots politics that transcended the classic debates and issues. The main predicament for the Egyptian population was the lack of democracy. Once Egyptians were able to free themselves from the Mubarak dictatorship, they would be able to determine their own fate. Mobilization around universal civil and human rights served as a short-cut to circumvent issues such as class and Egypt’s political economy. In order to

¹²⁰⁴ See interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

overthrow the Pharaoh, leftists should collaborate with all political and societal forces who shared the same goal: liberals, nationalists, Islamists, et cetera. This perspective was not an external idea forced upon the civil-democratic movement; it was immanent to the emerging collaborative Project as activists from different political families worked together around the same goal. However, the exclusion of subaltern actors and their economic struggles from the activity-system distorted its “philosophy of praxis”. The civil-democratic movement only advanced a clear *political* critique of the passive revolution’s practices of domination, coercion and exclusion, and did not reveal the connection of these superstructural forms to transformations in Egypt’s economic structure. The concept of *al-nizam* was foreign-sponsored “dictatorship” rather than a neoliberal ensemble of domestic and global political and economic relations.

The “anti-imperialist” and “democratic” Left found each other in the civil-democratic movement and advanced the same type of alliance: a coalition between all “democratic” forces, including economically right-wing liberals, nationalists, and “civil” Islamists as representatives of the “progressive” or “national” bourgeoisie. The vague conception of “the people” as the primary social actor against “the dictator” represented the broad coalition of class forces. The strategy of the civil-democratic movement primarily entailed a war of movement against the State, embodied in street protests that directly challenged presidential power. The emerging counter-hegemonic apparatus of the civil-democratic bloc reflected the heterogeneity of its participants and contained parties such as *al-Karama*, *al-Ghad*, *al-Wasat*, and *al-Gabha*; human rights’ organizations; journalists; activists from *Tagammu*, the ECP, and the Muslim Brotherhood; movements such as *Kefaya*; and, later on, loose youth networks such as 6 April and the Al-Baradei Campaign.¹²⁰⁵ The civil-democratic counter-bloc represented a collection of counter-hegemonic apparatuses, rather than a coherent “party” with a clear directive center. At the highpoint of the civil-democratic movement in 2005, *Kefaya* was emerging as a potential apparatus that could unite the various participating Projects. Its collapse re-fragmented the civil-democratic movement, which reverted to a war of position by building and consolidating its grassroots committees and virtual networks.

¹²⁰⁵ Interview with Abd al-Rahman Yusuf, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

A Subaltern Bloc

Democratic Immanence

A layer of leftists had participated in the civil-democratic movement without losing sight of the structural “economic” dimension of the neoliberal bloc. They were drawn to the emerging social movements and forms of class struggle that the neoliberal passive revolution provoked. For these leftists, the recognition of the worker Subject as a powerful social force able to challenge the State often went hand in hand with, on the one hand, the failure of the civil-democratic movement as a counter-hegemonic Project, and, on the other, the saliency of the workers’ movement and its victories. *Pace* the civil-democratic bloc, which operated according a liberal logic of political emancipation, they advocated a national-popular bloc as the political and economic emancipation of the subaltern classes: “...we support the poor people and the workers and farmers.”¹²⁰⁶ These leftists expressed the historical promise of an emancipatory Project that had been continuously repressed by the sequence of “populist” blocs, where subaltern groups were dominated by domestic elites such as landlords and “national” capitalists.

Against the stagist strategy, where “democracy” comes first and “social justice” later, the “subaltern” Left moved an integral and immanent concept of the democratic process. Medhat al-Zahed explained that:

*Liberal democracy is not a sin. The right to demonstrate, people beg for this. So you can use every opportunity to strengthen yourself. Democracy is about enabling and empowering the weak people, taking benefit of every available opportunity. But all the time I want to empower weak groups. And we need to understand that the national question, the democratic demands and social demands are connected to each other... Democracy will not happen first and then social demands will start. No, you cannot focus on democracy to solve the other questions. On the contrary, by focusing on social matters you will create democracy. Because you will discover that when you struggle alongside people who are deprived of democracy and who fight for their own interests, that they will organize themselves and they will craft their weapons during their battles.*¹²⁰⁷

The Mahalla strike movement showed how workers “crafted their weapons during their battles” – i.e. how, from the development of their collaborative

¹²⁰⁶ Interview with Geber Serkis, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹²⁰⁷ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 9 November 2010.

Project, democratic forms of self-governance emerged. Democracy is not a “system” that has to be injected into society: it is a mode of governance that is already implicitly present within the practical critique of the subaltern movements.

Class Composition

As I discussed in the previous chapter, leftists disagreed about the developmental level of the workers’ movement. The position of the working class within the subaltern counter-bloc depended on their appreciation of the ZPD of the workers’ movement. Leftists who had a low estimation of the workers’ ZPD assigned the proletarian Subject an assisting, but not a leading role in the subaltern national-popular bloc. Workers were subsumed in the subaltern “masses”, either because they had not **yet** differentiated themselves sufficiently as a class actor – for example in the conception of leftist *Tagammu* and ECP activists – or because they were not expected to constitute themselves **ever** as a separate class – according to leftist Nasserist and nationalist activists. Other leftists, especially those with a Trotskyite background, cast the workers’ movement as the (potential) leading actor and “hegemon” of the subaltern counter-bloc. Participation in the workers’ collaborative Project guarantees the emancipation of other subaltern groups: therefore, rather than constructing an amorphous subaltern bloc, leftists should build an explicit “proletarian” Prince.

For Gramsci, the constitution of a proletarian counter-hegemony required a horizontal expansion of its activity-system: *“The proletariat can become the leading and dominant class in the measure in which it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances that will permit it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State.”*¹²⁰⁸ Other subaltern Subjects are drawn into the Project of the working class, joining the proletarian counter-bloc, on the condition that, firstly, they are attracted by salient worker actions in the Strike, recognizing in the proletarian struggle the road to their own emancipation;¹²⁰⁹ and, secondly, that they become equal collaborators in the workers’ Project.

In a rural country such as Egypt, the integration of farmers into the proletarian bloc was essential to the successful formation of a counter-hegemony. The role of

¹²⁰⁸ Gramsci 2005: 31-32.

¹²⁰⁹ Gramsci 1971: 133.

the *Sa'id*¹²¹⁰ was to Egypt what Sicily was to Italy.¹²¹¹ Hisham Fouad of the SLCHR and the RS pointed to the limited instances of collaboration between workers and peasants, and how the Mahalla movement interpellated farmers to organize themselves. Moreover, the still ongoing process of proletarianization sometimes entwined worker and peasant Subjectivities, as some workers were peasants before, or had family members who worked in the countryside. Despite the similarity between the workers' and peasants' demands and interests, and their common resistance against the neoliberal passive revolution, there was, in general, little solidarity between the two classes. Fouad explained that, firstly, before the worker and peasant movements could be united, they had to be united within themselves. Secondly, the structures that could connect these two movements were still non-existent.¹²¹²

After the fall of Mubarak, the different conception of the role of the working class in the subaltern bloc was reflected in the creation of, on the one hand, the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, which aimed to gather all subaltern actors in a national-popular bloc around a broad socialist program; and, on the other, the Workers National Democratic Party, which established itself explicitly as the political expression of the working class.

Weak Parties

Some leftists argued that the development of a counter-hegemony did not necessarily entail a concomitant building of directional, technical, and cultural apparatuses. Geber Serkis of the ADNP, for example, explained that:

We believe that the role of parties is to create a climate now, not to organize the people, because the parties are not strong. In addition the people are very angry but still far from the parties. We have faith in the popular movement otherwise we would sit in our parties and houses... We in the parties do not want to be heroes. The only hero is the people. We believe that there are some leaders among the Egyptian people. Those leaders will come forward and call for change. Parties cannot do anything but create a climate until some leaders from the people rise up and call for change. This happened in some countries, not only Egypt. The members of the parties are now not of the normal people, but they are elite. The

¹²¹⁰ Upper Egypt.

¹²¹¹ See Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹²¹² Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October, 2010.

*elite can only create a climate, but it cannot make a real change. Only people can make a real change.*¹²¹³

Traditional intellectuals should only join the existing movements and support them. For political activists, engaged journalism seemed to be the preferable way to do politics under the conditions of the Mubarak dictatorship. As I argued in the previous chapters, journalists played an important role in the development of the Egyptian worker Subject. Engaged journalists wrote about labor problems and strikes, supported the workers' movement with connective, projective, and expressive assistance, and constituted thereby one of the pillars of a potential proletarian hegemonic apparatus. Conversely, journalism allowed political activists to approach the workers' movement in a roundabout way, (partially) overcoming both State repression and workers' suspicions vis-à-vis political activism.

Al-Badil editor Khaled al-Balshy, however, admitted the limits of political journalism: "as the problem in Egypt is a political problem, it has to have a political solution, and in the end the press can't take the lead in this."¹²¹⁴ The role of political journalism was restricted because journalists lacked direction and organizational resources: the framework of a "party" in the narrow sense. In order to forge a bloc against Mubarak's passive revolution, actors had to create stable and coherent networks and centers. However, every actor involved in either the strike or the civil-democratic movement acknowledged that the existing political parties were weak at their best, and corrupt at their worst. Even though individual activists of the Old Left and the parties of the New Left oriented themselves towards the strike movement, Muhammad Abd al-Azim, a Mahalla worker and journalist, observed that:

Parties played a role during the strike but not a great role. You can see its results. Normally we could have a good connection between the political parties and the workers and now we cannot. This shows that there were problems. Not only because the parties are weak, but also because the workers are scared of political parties and they don't like to participate. Especially because the workers have specific class demands, not general political demands like the parties, for economic and social change. The role of parties was not prepared: it was only some meetings with workers in the factory, telling them how to deal with the problems they faced.

¹²¹³ Interview with Geber Serkis, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹²¹⁴ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 8 April 2009.

*...the parties have to change themselves. When the parties change themselves they will become stronger and when the parties are stronger they can lead the workers and then there can be a connection between workers and the parties.*¹²¹⁵

This was a circular argument that expressed a circular reality: because the political parties were “weak”, they didn’t attract workers; and because they didn’t attract workers, they were weak.¹²¹⁶ The argument that parties were “weak” and should become “strong” expressed a “good sense” of their predicament. Political parties were “weak” because they lacked technical, cultural, and directive prestige, and because their ties to the workers’ movement were often frail and inorganic. Workers did not trust the small political organizations because they were seen as “alien” to their activity-system, and/or because they did not believe these groups were able to stand up against *al-nizam*. One does not need a rational choice explanation for workers’ apolitical behavior to realize that, at that time, for most workers, the benefits of joining a weak (and often illegal) opposition party did not seem to outweigh the risks of losing their job, getting arrested and tortured, and thus endangering their families and livelihoods.

The Cultural Field

The development of a hegemonic apparatus does not only entail the formation of a political directive “center”, but also the constitution of a field of dialectical pedagogy. The Modern Prince is not only a “party” in the narrow sense, but also an ensemble of cultural institutions. *Tagammu’s* cartoonist, Hassanein, elucidated the potential cultural role of a counter-hegemonic apparatus:

¹²¹⁵ Interview with Muhammad Abd al-Azim, Mahalla, 12 November 2010.

¹²¹⁶ As Ahmed Belal pointed out, this circular dynamic was also present among the Egyptian youth, who, in general, perceived parties in a negative light: “Mubarak governed Egypt for 28 years. All these years we’ve made the same mistake – and those on Facebook are making it now as well. The Mubarak regime says that the parties are weak and that people have to go to the NDP, because in other parties you go to prison, you are without job. Now when I’m in the party I can’t work in any government job, I didn’t serve in the Egyptian army because I’m a leftist. So people are scared, and say we won’t join or participate any political party. The youth on Facebook say the same: don’t join the parties because they are weak! They came one day to the party and I said to them, if the party is weak come to them. But they say no. But they are soldiers without officers, and we are officers without soldiers, we can’t make war. They refused to join the parties. So the parties will be weaker. [And when the parties are more weak...] then we can’t stay in touch with the workers and other people.” (Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 6 April 2009.)

When I gather the children and make them listen to Shaykh Imam, or play the oud, or draw, it is a way to make their consciousness revolutionary. When they become older and listen to Shaykh Imam they will listen and understand things they didn't understand when they were children. It is a way of understanding and thinking, to raise them in their role to become leaders, to make them think for themselves, and to let them make decisions, and to let them make a revolution...

The children, the journalists, I trained them and they are still here, like Sahar and Brania, they draw caricatures and they make the newspaper. I trained Heba and Haisam and Muhammad Galab how to write as a Tagammu activist should write. They should be the leaders in the future, of the journalists and the whole party. The leftist movements and the party had always the tradition that they trained them and then left them to go where they want like Rose al-Yusuf. Now this is made by only the effort of one member, myself. It is not a plan. If Tagammu would make this in an academic way it would be different and better. Now I have to do it myself. They had programs to make youth leaders, how to do politics, to speak and write in a political way, to be journalists. Tagammu had written programs, it used to train people, but now I have to do it by myself.¹²¹⁷

Leftist actor Muhammad Zaky Murat agreed that leftists had neglected building counter-hegemonic cultural institutions with organic ties to the workers' movement:

Independent leftist artists who work on democratic themes did not have any supervision or direction from the leftist leadership that pushed them to the workers' movement... We need a real party that is engaged with labor issues and that engages artists with workers in order to produce a progressive culture.¹²¹⁸

The problem was not the production and performance of counter-hegemonic forms of art or education, but the fragmented, unsystematic and *ad hoc* nature of these activities, which prevented the development of a coherent counter-culture: "There are movements, but they are weak. In spite of what the government does, there are a number of youths who go to cafés and present theater for fifty minutes and then the police comes and arrests them. So they have no opportunity to develop their art."¹²¹⁹ Essam Shabeen of *Afaaq Ishtirakiyya* concurred:

¹²¹⁷ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 13 October 2010.

¹²¹⁸ Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

¹²¹⁹ Interview with Salah Adly, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

*This is important in Egypt: there is no sponsorship for independent art... Political organizations try to support it, but it is difficult. For example we support the festival of short films. But in general these groups do not have financial support or an audience for their art. They are all youth during their university years, when they have more freedom and time. After university it is difficult for them to work in art, because they are forced due to the economic situation to search for jobs, but there are little opportunities for work, their salaries are very little so they have to work in two jobs and often they don't have time for any political activity... The street theatre is a model for this. Artists get married, others look for jobs, there is no support or sponsorship for them. The cultural places don't welcome them, because these places and even the parties only welcome the well-known artists, but they don't encourage those artists who are still beginning. Here, in Afaaq, we welcome many theater artists, they are our friends and so on...*¹²²⁰

Party Building

Leftists building the subaltern counter-bloc developed different strategies in constructing political and cultural hegemonic apparatuses. Firstly, there was the “New Left in the Old Left”: the engaged labor leaders and activists in *Tagammu*, the ECP, and the ADNP. These groups hoped to “capture” their organizations, and orient these directly available apparatuses to the development of the subaltern movements. Their counter-hegemonic practice was reminiscent of early Western social-democracy, in the sense that they hoped to build a popular mass party that eventually would be able to impose its hegemony on civil and political society. Whereas some militants such as Wael Tawfiq conceptualized their participation in the Old Left structures as a temporary entryist tactic, which was but one step in a fluid war of movement against the State, most *Tagammu* activists saw their internal struggle as part of a deeply entrenched and protracted war of position. Activists such as Haisam Hassan and Ahmed Belal aimed to connect their political struggle to the everyday activity of the subaltern masses, and used the legality of *Tagammu* as a springboard for this activity. For example, Haisam Hassan told me about how he and other *Tagammu* activists used the November 2010 elections as a pretext to “do politics” in popular neighborhoods such as Darb al-Ahmar and Abdeen in Cairo. They talked with working class people, discussing their daily problems, and made a neighborhood newspaper that bundled these issues together with relevant excerpts from *Tagammu's* political and economic program. This way they connected the people's particular,

¹²²⁰ Interview with Essam Shabeen, Cairo, 13 November 2010.

common sense understanding of their daily predicament with a general critique of Egypt's political economy.¹²²¹ Such partisan initiatives created a temporary field of dialectical pedagogy. However, because the Old Left apparatus as a whole did not engage in a coherent and systematic way with the everyday popular struggles, these shared activity-systems were fickle and undeveloped. In general the Old Left structures remained isolated from the subaltern struggles, and failed to become a sustained field of dialectical pedagogy.

Secondly, leftists such as Kamal Abbas, Nawla Darwish, Khaled Ali, and Saud Omar established "radical" NGOs, centers, or committees that aimed to assist subaltern Subjects without offering an explicit political strategy for the capture of State power.¹²²² What these formations lacked in political direction, they often compensated for in terms of technical and cultural assistance to the developing subaltern Subjects. The radical NGOs engaged in a war of position against the State, largely ignoring political society, but building strongholds and claiming spaces for subaltern Subjects within civil society. Khaled Ali explained that the ECESR "...participated and coordinated with many political organizations in Egypt. For example *Tadamon*, we cooperated with them on many issues and we hosted them. We opened our apartment until they opened their own office. Before this they hadn't had a place to meet and the center here hosted them."¹²²³ As long as movements were still struggling to overcome their economic-corporate condition, these structures played a crucial role in instructing and supporting their development. Their proleptic role often ended when subaltern Subjects moved to the political domain. Although the radical NGOs did not develop a counter-hegemonic strategy of their own, they offered subaltern Subjects frameworks to build their own counter-hegemonic apparatuses.

Thirdly, many young leftists were loath to join either a political party or an NGO, and became active in networks such as 6 April and movements such as the Popular Democratic Movement for Change (HASHD). Unlike the radical NGOs, these formations were often highly politicized and preferred street mobilization and direct action above organizational institutionalization. HASHD, for example:

¹²²¹ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 28 September 2010.

¹²²² This category also encompassed "workerist" grassroots groups such as the RS-constituted *Tadamon*. Other centers such as *Afaaq Ishtirakiyya* and the *Center for Socialist Studies* were **directly** connected to political formations such as, respectively, the ECP and the RS.

¹²²³ Interview with Khaled Ali, Cairo, 25 October 2010.

*“...was not a hierarchical structure, it didn’t have a leader, it was basically committees that revolved around a program...”*¹²²⁴ Although these leftists aimed to combine a political with an economic critique of the neoliberal bloc, their class composition – mostly students and urban professionals – and modes of activity – new social media and street protest – prevented them from developing a profound and sustained collaborative Project with subaltern groups such as industrial workers, farmers, and slum dwellers. Furthermore, organized activists from parties such as *al-Karama*, the RS, and *al-Amal* often structured the activities of these loose movements: *“When they organize a protest and some people of 6 April are seen participating in it, the media will frame it as an activity of the 6 April.”*¹²²⁵

Lastly, some leftist groups, such as the RS, upheld the Leninist vanguard model of party building. According to this strategy, as long as leftists operated under conditions of a repressive dictatorship, they could only establish a small and underground organization of dedicated revolutionaries. The vanguard party was seen as the embryonic proletarian hegemonic apparatus and the embodiment of the proletarian “collective intellectual”.¹²²⁶ The connection of the vanguard to the subaltern masses was often mediated by “front organizations” and alliances that attracted activists with a lower political profile. For example, RS activists intervened in the civil-democratic movement, and recruited non-proletarian layers, which were then oriented towards the class struggle where they assisted the development of the worker Subject. Conversely, via its engagement in the class struggle, the party recruited organic worker leaders, who were then fused with non-proletarian intellectuals. The RS spawned a host of front organizations – the Free Student Union, HASHD, *Tadamon*, the CSS, et cetera. This approach was to a large extent inspired by the British SWP’s tactic of party building through front organizations.¹²²⁷

However, the vanguard model was criticized from within the RS by a group of leftists who would split from the organization in 2010 to establish the SRC.

In the end we developed the analysis that small organizations such as ours see themselves as the nucleus of the revolutionary party. Even if the militants themselves are very good and not sectarian, this point of view will make them act

¹²²⁴ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹²²⁵ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 11 November 2010.

¹²²⁶ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Cairo, 17 March 2011.

¹²²⁷ E.g. the Anti-Nazi League, the Stop the War coalition, and Respect. See Shain 2009.

sectarian. If I see myself as the nucleus of the revolutionary party, and there is another group behind me, I will see him wrongly, and I will see him as [a competitor].

We developed the analysis that a revolutionary party was never built this way, as a small group of revolutionaries of fifty, or ten, and that they would recruit people, becoming one hundred next year, and then the year after that... It is never built that way. And when working in several strikes and struggles... You are not thinking how these struggles can succeed. You are only thinking: that man is a very good one, I can recruit him, and so on. This is the way we can name... the party-building approach. We were against this approach. We thought that building the movement was much more sophisticated than that. There are several radical points in the society and we can only be a catalyst to reunify those people and making a bridge between them. It will be a process, not a straight line, but with twists and turns will the revolutionary party be build. And we are not the nucleus of this. We just think of ourselves as a group of revolutionary activists who are inside the movement, who just exchange experiences and constitute a bridge between people and movements, enabling people to get to know each other, develop their demands and ways of struggle. In this way, in this dialectical way, we can have the party in the end. So in 2010 we had a split. This is how the SRC began. This is our history.¹²²⁸

The SRC criticized the *Selbstzweck* of vanguardism. By conceptualizing grassroots democratic and class movements in an instrumental way, as the mere building blocks of a party, the development of the vanguard – and not of the subaltern Subject itself – was at the center of the Project. This was also the criticism of some Mahalla workers with regard to the intervention of the RS in “their” strike.¹²²⁹ The hegemonic apparatus is not developed by professional revolutionaries outside the movements, but from inside the subaltern activity-systems themselves. The SRC conceptualized leftists as assistants in the formation of a counter-hegemonic bloc rather than as its already existing core. This criticism also echoed the concern among many leftists for political pluralism. Fakhry Labib, for example, mused that:

But I believe in something new, something different than the past. In the past we believed that there should be only one communist party in one country. Now I believe in plurality. You can have three, four, five parties, no problem. Coordinate

¹²²⁸ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹²²⁹ See previous chapters.

*together, but do not fight each other. We spent a lot of time fighting each other. So it destroyed a lot of time, it destroyed ourselves. Today we say "you want a party, ok, have a party, let's work together". Perhaps there is a party in Alexandria, a party in Mahalla, a party in Aswan. Ok. But work together, coordinate together.*¹²³⁰

Before the 25 January Revolution there were various unsuccessful attempts at bringing the fragmented leftists together, for example:

*...the Socialist Alliance, which started in 2006... The Alliance consists of Tagammu, CP, al-Karama party, the Revolutionary Socialists, and some centre parties such as Democratic Left and organizations such as the ECESR... the SA doesn't do anything. Each group competes against each other and the meetings do not result in anything. Even if we all left our party and started a new one together, we would compete with each other and split again.*¹²³¹

The 25 January Revolution partially solved the strategic debate. Together with Tagammu's left wing, the SRC constituted the Socialist Popular Alliance Party (SPAP), differentiating itself from other leftist projects. The RS, for its part, did not develop its own "mass" party, but assisted in the formation of the Workers National Democratic Party (WNDP). However, it is to be seen if the SPAP and the WNDP are developed as real, mass collaborative Projects, rather than as mere extensions of the existing leftist organizations.

¹²³⁰ Interview with Fakhry Labib, Cairo, 17 February 2008.

¹²³¹ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 9 October 2010.



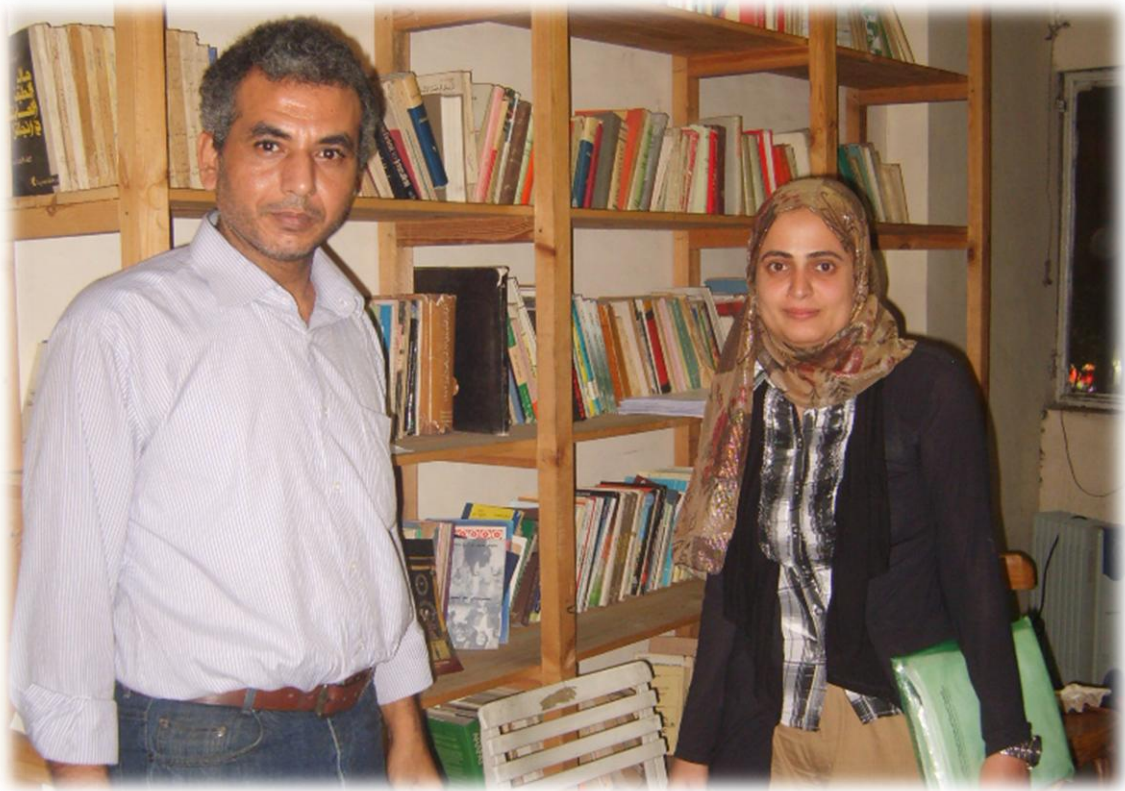
Meeting in Afaaq Ishtirakeyya (with Salah Adly on the right, and Helmi Sha'rawi in the center of the panel) Cairo, April 2009



*Amal Abd al-Hadi
NWF HQ, Cairo, 23 February 2008*



*MB MP Said Husayni
Ikhwan HQ, Mahalla, 20 May 2009*



*Mustafa Bassiouny (left) and Sayyida al-Sayyid Muhammad (right)
Center for Socialist Studies, Giza, 12 October 2010*



*Hamdi Qenawi (left) and Muhammad Taher (right)
"Andrea building", Tagammu HQ, Mansura, 17 April 2009*



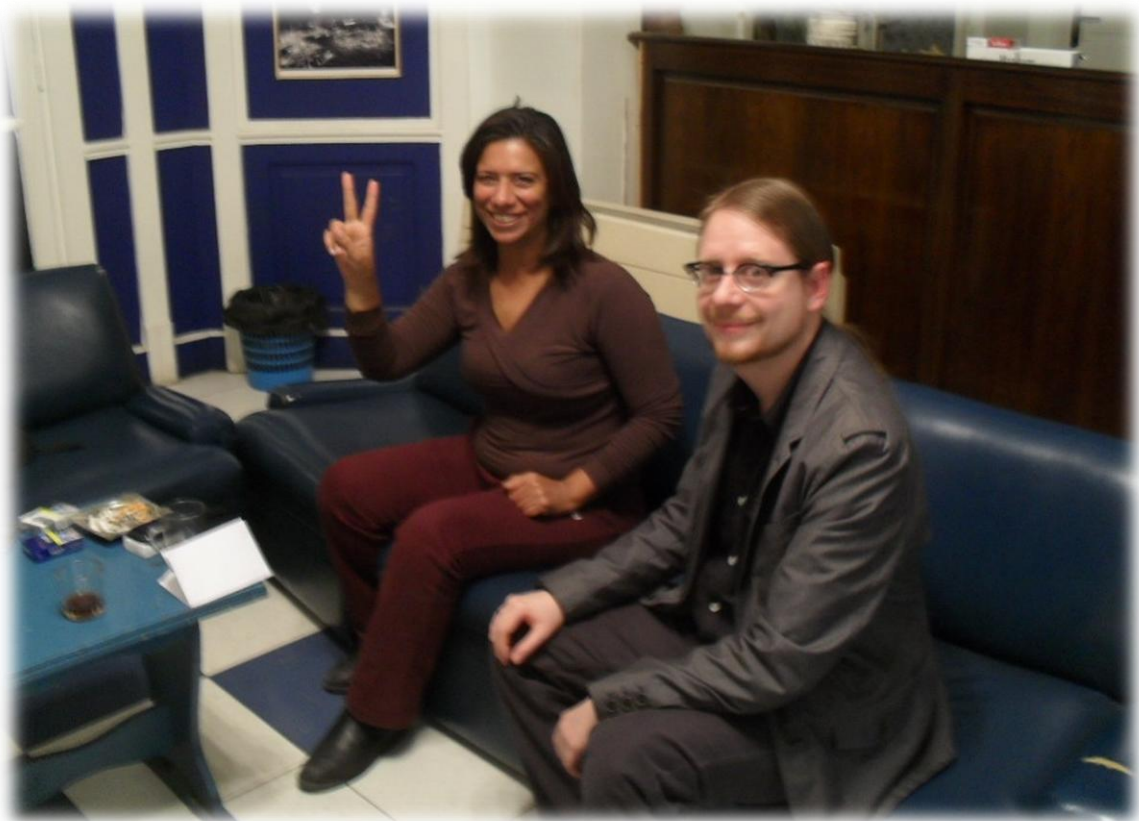
Meeting with farmers and Mahmud Foda (right), Tagammu HQ, Dikirnis, 17 April 2009



Meeting with workers (with Sayyid Habib in the middle), CTUWS HQ, Mahalla, 20 May 2009



Saud Omar (left), Haisam Hassan (middle), Engineer Club, Suez, 17 October 2010



Menal Khalid, Cinema Workers' Union, Cairo, 25 March 2011



First meeting of the Union of Egyptian Socialist Youth, Tagammu HQ, Cairo, 21 March 2011



Spontaneously directing traffic around Tahrir Square, Cairo, March 2011



Military defending al-Borsa, Cairo March 2011



Revolutionary Graffiti, Cairo, near Tahrir Square, March 2011



*Poster against sectarianism (by Hassanein)
Cairo, Tagammu HQ, March 2011*



*The commodification of the revolution
Cairo, Tahrir Square, March 2011*

PART V

The 25 January Revolution

Introduction

If, one day, the people want life, fate must yield
Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (in: Antoon 2011b)

Writing History in the Making

This part of my dissertation was both the most electrifying and frustrating to write. On the one hand, the 25 January Revolution constituted, in every way, a unique opportunity and experience. From a personal point of view, the revolution vindicated my intuition and hope that “the masses” were still a social force able to “make history”. Moreover, it proved that Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries in the region were not inoculated against movements from below by their authoritarian “regimes”, or by their cultural and religious predispositions. Lastly, it filled me with joy that my Egyptian friends and acquaintances finally felt in command of their own destinies and lives. As such, it was at the same time a deeply political and humanist experience. From an academic perspective, the revolution allowed me to develop and expand my research in ways I could not have dreamed of. Firstly, the revolution brought the tentative relation and ambiguous reciprocity between the civil-democratic and workers’ movement to a whole new level. Secondly, the disorganization of the State created new opportunities and “upper boundaries” for trade unionism. The future development of the Strike that I had cautiously contemplated in thought was now becoming real before my eyes. Lastly, as one of the few Belgian academics involved in the study of contemporary political and social protest in Egypt, I became part of the journalistic, political, and intellectual debate “at home” about the nature of the “Arab Spring”. I return to the ramifications of such a participation and engagement in *A Self-Reflecting Note*.

On the other hand, the 25 January Revolution posed many challenges to my research. As the revolution presented a new phase in the development of the twin pillars of “political” and “economic”, I added an analysis of the revolutionary process to my investigation of the Mahalla strike movement. This decision was not without implications for the development of my research. Firstly, I had to cancel my planned analysis of textual sources (in Arabic) about the Mahalla strike movement, and replace it with a new field trip to Egypt in March and April 2011,

and the study of the newly unearthed primary sources. In other words: the expansion of the subject matter narrowed my primary empirical data to interviews and observations. Secondly, writing about “history in the making” seemed to be always and necessarily *incomplete* and *outdated*. With regard to the Egyptian case, my dissertation, up until the moment of writing, is incomplete because its subject matter – the revolution – is unfinished and continues to unfold. Taking the fall of Mubarak as a formal end point of the analysis seemed pointless, because the main developments of the trade union movement happened *after* February 2011. When I began writing, the parliamentary elections of 2011 seemed a logical choice to delimit the dissertation, but soon I found myself integrating some of the 2012 events in the text. The revolution runs its course and as a political scientist I cannot but try to keep up. Moreover, because of their historical importance and saliency, the Arab revolts spawned a whole field of academic literature – right at the time when I had to focus my efforts on writing and presenting my research. Sometimes it was discouraging to see how some of my “original” writings were rendered outdated, not only by the revolutionary process itself, but by the academic race to be the first one to publish something meaningful on the revolutionary process. Likewise, the editors of the *Interface* journal mused that:

*Too many experts who claim sympathy with Arab people’s struggles, and claim to be in opposition to Western hegemony and exploitation of the globe have rushed quickly to assert expertise on the Arab revolution, and to make early judgments on it mere weeks or months after it started, as if it is something that has ended, rather than seeing it as something that is in the making.*¹²³²

Although I integrated – to my best ability – the freshly emerging literature on the revolution, the following chapters are based largely on interviews and journalistic sources. In fact, *Chapter 21 Story of a Revolution*, for example, is a reflection of my own perception of the unfolding of the revolt, as it chiefly uses the same sources that were available to me at the time, complemented with *post factum* interviews and secondary literature. Furthermore, the *ad hoc* analyses of anthropologists such as Samuli Schielke, or sociologists such as Muhammad Bamyeh, which appeared in *Jadaliyya*, constituted a special domain of source material: they did not only speak about the revolution; the revolution spoke through their stories. Their

¹²³² Shihade, Flesher, and Cox 2012: 1-2.

narrations mediated in important ways my conceptualization of the 25 January Revolution, and I deploy their voices next to those of the actors in the text.

Overview

At this point, the whole dissertation could be read as a prelude to the 25 January Revolution. The “deep” causality of the revolutionary process is rooted in the two decades of neoliberal and violent passive revolution, which, in turn, was precipitated by the crisis-ridden development of the Egyptian social formation. Likewise, the protagonists of the revolutionary drama had been educated in the “general repetitions” of the political and economic protests that contested neoliberal reform. In *Chapter 20 Reason in Revolt* I contemplate that, for most Egyptians, there were not only many reasons to revolt, but that revolt became increasingly “reasonable”. I also briefly engage with the direct motives of the 25 January Revolution: the murder of Khaled Said; the 2010 parliamentary elections; and the Tunisian Revolution. This introductory chapter is followed by *Chapter 21 Story of a Revolution*, which shapes up as a light narrative of the events, and forms a framework for the following chapters. For those readers who are not familiar with the chain of events, this chapter offers a concise summary.

The analysis of the 25 January Revolution really begins with *Chapter 22 A Revolutionary Project*. Firstly, I discuss the concept of revolution, and I inscribe myself in Trotsky’s emancipatory and political reading of the “essence” of the revolutionary process: “...the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.”¹²³³ Secondly, I take Paul Amar’s critique of the three dominant “frames” of the revolution as a lead-off to investigate the nature of the emerging Subject. “The people” as a collaborative Project was constructed throughout the revolutionary process. Thirdly, I investigate, step by step, the key moments in the development of the revolutionary activity-system. Fourthly, I engage with the role of activists and the notion of “spontaneity”. Fifthly, I pay special attention to the role of art in constituting a temporary directive “center” for the movement – in the absence of structures that could play such a part. Lastly, I offer some preliminary thoughts on the developing Subjectness of the movement, which is, at the same time, an introduction to the next chapter.

¹²³³ Trotsky 2001: 17-8.

I continue the analysis of the revolutionary process in *Chapter 23 The Republic of Tahrir*, by zooming in on the Square that came to symbolize the entire revolution. I begin to explain the four leading activities of Tahrir: demonstration, occupation, festival, and governance. Subsequently, I turn towards the role of “intellectuals” in the Square. I finish with some brief observations of how Tahrir, apart from being a collaborative Project, also projected the image of an alternative society into Egypt and the world.

After Tahrir, in *Chapter 24 Workers and the Revolution*, I focus on the development of the worker Subject within the womb of revolution. In accordance with most observers at the time, I stress that workers only belatedly entered the revolutionary Project *as workers*. Before they joined the protests as non-differentiated units of *al-sha'b*, but not as a workers' movement. However, when workers participated as class Subjects, they helped to turn the tide for the revolution. The “proletarian” strikes and the “civil” marches on parliament and the presidential palace pressured the military to depose of Mubarak. After the fall of the President, the strikes and development of the worker Subject continued and expanded, whereas the collaborative Project of *al-sha'b* disintegrated. In order to understand the dialectic between revolution and the strike movement, and between political and economic protests, I deploy Rosa Luxemburg's concept of the Mass Strike. Next, I explore the possibilities and constraints of independent trade unionism, and the role of the workers' movement in the completion of the revolutionary process.

In *Chapter 25 The Counter-revolution*, I sketch the main dynamics of the forces that aim to block a completion of the revolutionary process. Firstly, I give an outline of the military and civil groups that dominate the State – I do not go much into detail because most of these forces have been sufficiently investigated earlier in the text. Secondly, I present the development of State reaction against the revolutionary movement. Thirdly, I discuss the military intervention, comparing the Caesarism of the SCAF with that of the Free Officers in 1952. Fourthly, I address the “winners” and “losers” of the uprising: i.e. the reconfiguration of the ruling bloc. Fifthly, the role of the Muslim Brotherhood before, during, and after the uprising is examined. A distinction is made between the attitudes of the leadership and those of radical youth members. Lastly, the call for

“normalization” and “stability” that was issued after the fall of Mubarak is explained as one of the most dangerous weapons of the counter-revolution.

Finally, *Chapter 26 The Revolutionary Prince* scrutinizes the crystallization of the mass activity of *al-sha'ab* in various political Projects. The occupation of Tahrir was an insufficient activity to overcome the predicament of the SCAF's predicament. After the collapse of the “Republic of Tahrir”, the two remaining neoformations of the revolutionary were the popular committees and the trade union movement. After Mubarak's fall, the fledgling counter-hegemonic blocs that were developing before the 25 January Revolution re-emerged in new forms. I focus in particular on the different imaginations among leftists of the subaltern bloc. I conclude that the completion of the revolution requires the formation of a collaborative and solidary Project between subaltern forces, in which the workers' movement plays a key role.

CHAPTER 20

Reason in Revolt

*For reason in revolt now thunders,
and at last ends the age of cant!*
The Internationale

Reason to/in Revolt

Many political activists and analysts, both inside and outside Egypt, recognized in the second half of the 2000s that the Egyptian social formation was overripe for revolution. Journalist John Bradley aptly named his 2008 book: *Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution*.¹²³⁴ I myself claimed in a 2009 article on the Egyptian Left that: *"The objective conditions and the consciousness of the Egyptian people are ready for change."*¹²³⁵ Many engaged Egyptian intellectuals recognized the rationality of revolution years before 25 January. In 2009 Hassanein, the *al-Ahali* cartoonist, prophesized that: *"The situation is growing worse, sooner or later there will be a revolution."*¹²³⁶ Senior journalist Medhat al-Zahed claimed that:

*Within three or four years Egypt will change, one way or another, the official structure will collapse as social conflict looks for a way to express itself beyond the limited pseudo-democracy. People don't like to go on the streets and protest, but they do it out of necessity. Anger will continue and accumulate. Through the struggle they will find a way to unify and the movement will gain a political dimension.*¹²³⁷

Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq suggested to me that: *"Even in the next year there could be a revolution: we should be ready and start organizing right now, or we won't have a successful revolution."*¹²³⁸ Two months before the revolution, and in the middle of the parliamentary elections, I conducted an interview with the Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany. With regard to the violence surrounding the elections, he declared that: *"...what is significant is that the regime has reached the point where it*

¹²³⁴ Bradley 2008.

¹²³⁵ De Smet 2009: 14.

¹²³⁶ Interview with Hassanein, Cairo, 14 April 2009.

¹²³⁷ Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 8 April 2009.

¹²³⁸ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 20 October 2010.

finds itself obliged to shoot the people, the citizens. This is a very significant sign that we are close to a real change in the country."¹²³⁹

Some leftists, however, rejected the possibility of a revolution – even though Egypt appeared to suffer plainly from Lenin's three "symptoms of a revolutionary situation": (1) a crisis of the ruling classes; (2) an increase in the suffering of the subaltern classes; (3) and an increase in the "activity of the masses" against the system.¹²⁴⁰ Let us return, for example, to Rifaat al-Said's cynical remark in 2009: *"If you imagined a revolution or something like that, it is too far-fetched, in my imagination. Poor people don't make revolutions, believe me. Poor people need to return in the afternoon with some pieces of bread to their family. They are too afraid."*¹²⁴¹ There was some truth in Said's statement, in the sense that the condition of poverty may be a *reason* to revolt, but is in itself not a revolutionary *force*.¹²⁴² Consequently, Lenin had added to his three conditions that: *"...revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change..."*¹²⁴³

Two decades of increased economic exploitation and political oppression in Egypt had not only produced passively poor and fearful Objects of regime policies, but also active Subjects and Subjectivities¹²⁴⁴ of resistance, as evidenced in the previous chapters.¹²⁴⁵ Moreover, it was the growing consciousness of inequality, rather than poverty itself, and of injustice, rather than coercion itself, which fuelled a mood of revolt, as Amina Al-Bendary explained:

*It is not simply the inflation and the soaring unemployment rates that have caused people to revolt this January. They have been protesting these over the past few years. But what pushed them was the sense of flagrant injustice; that prices increase while some cronies make billions; that certain social circles and groups monopolize economic opportunities; that power is also monopolized; that there are new groups rising, carving out their ever increasing territories and pieces of the cake and elbowing others out.*¹²⁴⁶

¹²³⁹ Interview with Alaa al-Aswany, Cairo, 26 November 2010.

¹²⁴⁰ Lenin 1974: 214. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁴¹ Interview with Rifaat al-Said, Cairo, 12 April 2009.

¹²⁴² Also see Ambrust 2011a.

¹²⁴³ Lenin 1974: 214. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁴⁴ See Ismail 2011.

¹²⁴⁵ See Lesch (2011) for a concise summary of the "causes" of the revolution.

¹²⁴⁶ Al-Bendary 2011a. Also see Ambrust 2011a.

This notion of “relative deprivation” – the “...actors’ perceptions of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities”¹²⁴⁷ – is in itself insufficient to explain revolutionary mass movements,¹²⁴⁸ but in the Egyptian case it points towards another process: a growing politicization of the problematic of poverty, and the acquisition of an “impression” – a “good sense” in Gramsci’s jargon – of the political economy that was responsible for the increasing class divide in society. Even the relatively de-politicized narrative of the Mubarak clique as “thieves”, implied that they stole a portion of the wealth that belonged to all Egyptians. Many Egyptian realized that, in Shakespeare’s words, “*though this be madness, there is method in it*”. This experienced systematicity of domination, oppression and exploitation would enable the masses to contest not only the figure of the Pharaoh, but the entire *nizam*. *Nizam* is often translated as “regime”, but the word carries a much broader connotation of method, structure, order, system, rule, and regulation. The reason *to* revolt was strengthened by the implicit realization that there was reason *in* revolt; that poverty was not naturally or divinely predestined, but that revolting against the unjust system was entirely rational and reasonable.¹²⁴⁹

It is easy to explain revolution as “the rational becoming real” – to paraphrase Hegel – but where does one concretely situate the activity of revolution in the ZPD of the Egyptian civil-democratic and workers’ movements? When do the reason *to* and *in* revolt actually lead to the activity of revolting? It is now commonly understood that – except for the creeping effects of the global crisis of capitalism from 2008 onwards – three “events” pushed the Egyptian populace over the brink of revolution. First was the brutal murder of Khaled Said, which enraged middle class youth; then followed the mind-boggling fraud of the parliamentary elections; and lastly, and probably most importantly, the Tunisian Revolution. Whereas the first two events instructed the Egyptian people on the arrogant brutality of the regime and its complete disdain for the dignity and rights of its citizens, the prolepsis of the Tunisian Revolution showed a concrete way out of the societal predicament, as anthropologist Samuli Schielke succinctly summarized:

¹²⁴⁷ Gurr 1968: 1104.

¹²⁴⁸ Kuran 1991: 16, 21.

¹²⁴⁹ Also see Naguib 2011.

*Egyptians have so long lived in a sense of oppression, a sense of frustration and pressure, they have hated the system but felt that there is nothing you can do. They have subverted the system by being chaotic and lazy, diverting the system to their ends, but all this has in turn become the system, encapsulating them in a highly frustrating state of suffering from a corrupt system and at the same time being a part of it. Suddenly the revolution in Tunisia opens a door of possibility, rejecting the system becomes something that makes sense: there is a point to it. In one night, the country changes.*¹²⁵⁰

Khaled Said

The Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon remarked that: *“If Bouazizi’s self-immolation was the spark in Tunisia, the brutal beating to death of Khaled Said, a 28-year old man from Alexandria, at the hands of two undercover policemen back in June of 2010 angered many Egyptians and spurred demonstrations.”*¹²⁵¹ Political scientist and human rights activist Sabry Zaky explained the significance of Khaled Said for the mobilization of the middle class youth in the months leading up to the revolution:

*...Khaled Said represented every one of them. Before this incident they were thinking like this: “ok, the torture and police station is something normal because they use it against criminals or baltageyya, thugs, or anyone who is related to this Ministry and it is happening against the lower classes, ordinary people in the streets, squatters, and so on. But when this happens to one of us, belonging to the middle class, oh my God, we are not far away from this, this can happen to us.” So this was a very important incident that ignited a lot of middle class people. “We will not allow them to do to us, what they dared to do to Khaled Said.” This is one of the factors that explain what happened, I think.*¹²⁵²

The name of the Facebook group, We are All Khaled Said, expressed this feeling of solidarity. The brutal murder of Khaled Said served as an *exemplum* of the violent degeneration of the entire Egyptian social formation. Since the passive revolution that began in the 1990s, in addition to the centralized State attacks on political and human rights activists and social movements, local police officers habitually harassed, tortured, and extorted ordinary citizens:¹²⁵³ *“Police demanding bribes, harassing small micro-businesses, and beating those who refuse to submit had*

¹²⁵⁰ Schielke 2011.

¹²⁵¹ Antoon 2011b.

¹²⁵² Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹²⁵³ Marfleet 2011.

become standard practice in Egypt."¹²⁵⁴ The oppression and exploitation of the population by petty bureaucrats and administrators were seen as the local expressions of the corruption of the whole *nizam*. The policemen who assaulted Khaled Said were not categorized as aberrations, but as the logical agents of a system of domination. The murder on Khaled Said spurred middle class youth on to organize and protest against the police State, not only through Facebook groups such as We are All Khaled Said and 6 April Youth, but also in movements such as HASHD, where they were further politicized.¹²⁵⁵

Supercilious Elections

If the murder of Khaled Said served as an *exemplum* of the rottenness of the system on the local level, the parliamentary elections of November 2010 became a symbol of the complete *hubris* of the rulers and their estrangement from society. Amina al-Bendary commented:

*In the last parliamentary elections NDP members alienated many sectors of society, both players in the political system and the overwhelming silent majority left out of it, by monopolizing the election process from nomination to election, resorting to any and all means necessary to keep non-NDP candidates out of parliament house; gerrymandering, intimidation, detention of opponents (especially Muslim Brotherhood members), old-fashioned rigging, physical violence — any and all means possible.*¹²⁵⁶

Thanks to an unprecedented display of massive fraud and intimidation Mubarak's NDP secured 209 of the 211 seats in the first round of voting.¹²⁵⁷ The Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest opposition force in parliament, almost magically lost all but one of its 88 seats. In the past, parliamentary elections had given the regime, on the one hand, an aura of legitimacy,¹²⁵⁸ and, on the other, a means to forge a base of consent with other political groups, such as the *Wafd*, *Tagammu* and the *Muslim Brotherhood*. Since the 1980s, one of the strengths of the Mubarak regime had been its ability to include and absorb political opposition

¹²⁵⁴ Amar 2011b.

¹²⁵⁵ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹²⁵⁶ Al-Bendary 2011a.

¹²⁵⁷ BBC News 7 December 2010.

¹²⁵⁸ Legitimacy not only based on the mere fact of holding elections, but also because it allowed the Mubarak regime to present itself as a beacon of secularism and realpolitik vis-à-vis the Islamists.

forces. However, the room to negotiate had diminished during the State's "war of maneuver" against its opponents in civil and political community in the 1990s and 2000s. The stubborn and disdainful rejection by the NDP's leaders of any meaningful concession for the opposition came, ironically, at a moment when the regime's hegemony was at a historical low point. In 2008, human rights activist Bahey al-Din Shabeen acknowledged that the arrogance of the ruling caste concealed its fundamental fears and weaknesses:

The regime was shocked by the impact of the movements in the streets, the political mobilization that took place the last two years. So, now the international attention is gone, the regime is working hard to readjust the situation so that the opposition will not be able to respond in the same way even if the international attention returns. This is one reason. The second reason is that the regime, in a way, is in a transitional period. The president is too old and there are a lot of rumors about his health situation and his performance and it seems that there is no consensus on how the situation will change if the president disappears today, tomorrow, ... This is what makes the regime feel weakened. It adopts every day more and more defensive mechanisms, which are in fact very aggressive actions, in legislature and in practice against people.¹²⁵⁹

The obsession of the inner NDP circle with the creation of an obedient parliament that would secure Gamal Mubarak's succession to power, combined with a supercilious and anxious refusal of any substantive democratic reform,¹²⁶⁰ spelled the end of the regime. In Suez, the 25 January Revolution was anticipated by mass protests against the election results:

In the first day, after the result of the elections, Suez had a demonstration of five or six thousand people standing in front of the police station, the governorate and state security buildings, which are close to each other. This day was a tryout for the revolution in Suez... We had a protest in the morning demanding an end to the regime, the police, and so on. This was during the elections, three months before the revolution. By the end of the day and after the results there was a huge demonstration in the streets of Suez, 15,000 citizens, and this was a huge number in these days.¹²⁶¹

¹²⁵⁹ Interview with Bahey al-Din Hassan, Cairo, 20 February 2008.

¹²⁶⁰ Sameh Naguib argued that the State was especially wary of social and political instability in the wake of the global economic crisis from 2008 onwards. (See Naguib 2011)

¹²⁶¹ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

Tunisian Prolepsis

Like other activists, Gihan Shabeen of the SRC emphasized the importance of Tunisia as a source of inspiration for the Egyptian revolution: *“Tunisia changed everything. Since twenty years ago we couldn’t convince people that things would change through the people’s power itself. Tunisia changed everything. We all saw on the television how Egypt could change.”*¹²⁶² Zaky commented that: *“...the revolution was inspired by the Tunisian revolution. Everyone said: “oh my God, it’s possible, they ousted Ben Ali, they can do that. The audacity. And we can do this too.”* ¹²⁶³ Khaled al-Balshy noted that:

*After the Tunisian revolution a lot of Egyptians discovered that the toll of revolution is not as heavy as they imagined. It isn’t such a big struggle. In Tunisia there were only 80 victims, so let us see how many people in Egypt should be killed to remove Mubarak. After the Tunisian revolution, a lot of Egyptians and my friends were asking ourselves if we could do the same or not. I wrote an article that the image of the Egyptian regime as being powerful is untrue, that it is in reality weak. I did not really believe in the article, but I played my role in encouraging people. What happens now in the whole Middle East is copying the Tunisian experience.*¹²⁶⁴

Youth activist Ahmed al-Gourd summarized the emergence of the idea of revolution in Egypt succinctly:

*It basically comes down to this: after Khaled Said was killed last summer, a Facebook page, We are all Khaled Said, was founded. After a few months people started to join the page and started to read everything that was being said in it. After that came the fake parliamentary elections of November 2010. But also that wasn’t enough. The real trigger was the Tunisian revolution. It basically showed Arabs that they are capable of overthrowing their leaders.*¹²⁶⁵

Since the year 2000 street politics had returned to Egypt, both in the shape of a civil-democratic and a workers’ movement, but whereas most political activists agreed on the desirability and necessity of a radical change of some kind, they could not locate the activity of revolution as a potential development within the general political ZPD of their time. Sabry Zaky admitted that: *“No one expected it,*

¹²⁶² Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹²⁶³ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹²⁶⁴ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

¹²⁶⁵ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

even though there were many indicators, but actually no one expected it."¹²⁶⁶ Khaled al-Balshy concurred: "...no one could imagine that it would happen like what happened on 25 January."¹²⁶⁷ The proleptic instruction of the Tunisian revolution offered the Egyptian masses a glimpse of their own revolutionary potentiality. All that was needed was a spark that allowed this potentiality to develop into actuality. The 25 January protests became the catalyst of this revolutionary process, as I describe in the next chapter.

¹²⁶⁶ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹²⁶⁷ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

CHAPTER 21

Story of a Revolution

The revolution still has no ritual, the streets are in smoke, the masses have not yet learned the new songs... The revolution is mighty but still naïve, with a child's naïveness.
Leon Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution (2001: 177)

Organizing the Day of Revolt

Because of widespread popular resentment towards the increased violence and authoritarianism of the Mubarak-regime and the shining example of the Tunisian Revolution, an “*unlikely alliance of youth activists, political Islamists, industrial workers and hardcore football fans*”¹²⁶⁸ felt confident to call on the Egyptian people to rise in protest on National Police Day, a national holiday on 25 January. This recent holiday commemorated the Battle of Ismailiyya on 25 January 1952, when police officers sided with the anti-colonial resistance against the British occupation forces. Ironically, the liberators of 1952 who were honored on Police Day had become the loathed epitomes of the oppressive State.¹²⁶⁹

Mobilization towards the Day of Rage was organized through virtual and “real” grassroots organizations and networks. In cyberspace, the two main mobilizing forces were the 6 April Youth Movement and the We are All Khaled Said Facebook networks. Whereas the We are All Khaled Said group was the more popular one, the 6 April network still had some 70,000 members and a more political profile, including both economic and democratic demands.¹²⁷⁰ We are All Khaled Said issued the call for a march against torture, corruption, poverty and unemployment on 25 January, and the 6 April Movement quickly joined its initiative. Facebook users changed their profile picture to indicate symbolic support for the protest.¹²⁷¹

Rather than a mobilizing force in itself, these virtual networks were mediations and instruments of youth networks and grassroots organizations that existed “outside” the virtual sphere. Saskia Sassen explained that: “*In Tahrir Square,*

¹²⁶⁸ Shenker 2011a

¹²⁶⁹ Al-Bendary 2011a.

¹²⁷⁰ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹²⁷¹ Ibid.; Herrera 2011a.

Facebook space is not 'social life'. Rather, it is more akin to a tool."¹²⁷² Paul Amar keenly observed that: "The so-called "Facebook revolution" is not about people mobilizing in virtual space; it is about Egyptian internet cafes and the youth and women they represent, in real social spaces and communities, utilizing the cyberspace bases they have built and developed to serve their revolt."¹²⁷³ The poet Sinaan Antoon agreed with this analysis and pointed the attention to the real Subject of the revolution, not technology, but people: "Yes, new technologies and social media definitely played a role and provided a new space and mode, but this discourse eliminates and erases the real agents of these revolutions: the women and men who are making history before our eyes."¹²⁷⁴

The call to protest from the new social media was strengthened by leftist e-zines such as al-Badil. Khaled a-Balshy, chief editor of al-Badil, explained how al-Badil played a role in the mobilization towards 25 January:

After the Tunisian revolution, especially on 24 January, I wrote something strange, and even members of al-Badil were asking: "what the hell are you doing now?!" I wrote on the day when Ben Ali resigned on the website: "The First One". With the start of the Tunisian revolution I put the Tunisian flag on the logo of al-Badil. When Ben Ali resigned and the protests in Egypt started, I switched to the Egyptian flag, symbolizing the shift of the revolution to Egypt. A lot of my friends were asking : "what the hell are you doing, you are kidding". On 24 January, we contacted political forces with the question: "will you attend the revolution or not?" And I wrote an article on 24 January to invite the people to the protests of 25 January because in my opinion it was the beginning of the end. And I said: "if you don't participate in these events you will be outside of Egyptian history, which will be written tomorrow". My friends in al-Badil asked me after writing this article: "where are you going right now?" I answered: "we are at the regime's end". We all saw that something big would happen, but we did not expect it like this.¹²⁷⁵

Apart from the call by the new and the traditional media the mobilization of thousands of protesters was realized through the organizing activities of political movements. There were four political tendencies that prepared for the Day of Rage – using the "traditional" means of face-to-face meetings of activists, distribution of pamphlets, and so on. The first tendency consisted of youths of the

¹²⁷² Sassen 2011: 578.

¹²⁷³ Amar 2011b.

¹²⁷⁴ Antoon 2011b.

¹²⁷⁵ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

Muslim Brotherhood, who decided to join the demonstration against the wishes of the Society's leadership.¹²⁷⁶

The second group was the so-called New Left, composed of young and active members of "old" parties such as *Tagammu* and the ECP, and militants of new movements such as HASHD, the RS, and the SRC.¹²⁷⁷ Gihan Ibrahim recalled:

*I went to a meeting, the Thursday before the Tuesday and there was a representative basically from each group that was taking part in the protest. We agreed on the final places, the locations, the time... What will we do, if we GET to Tahrir, what will happen, and so on [laughs]. We normally do this anyways, even before 25 January: we did it for the 21 September protest that was in Abdeen Square, for example. We were used to hold these kind of meetings for protests against the emergency law thing, or in favor of the minimum wage, or against high prices, and so on.*¹²⁷⁸

The supporters of Muhammad al-Baradei and *al-Gabha* (Democratic Front) party constituted a third faction:

*...a medley of individuals, ranging from liberals to progressive Islamists to a handful of leftists, some affiliated with political parties, notably the Democratic Front, and many freelancers. One of the main spokesmen of this group was the son of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a high-profile cleric; others were young entrepreneurs and corporate executives.*¹²⁷⁹

A fourth type of people who organized the protests "on the ground" were human rights activists, some of whom also belonged to the New Left or 6 April Movement umbrellas.¹²⁸⁰ For example, human right activist and 6 April member Asmaa Mahfuz distributed tens of thousands of leaflets in informal neighborhoods in Cairo the day before the protests.¹²⁸¹

A last and unlikely group of apolitical organizers were the "Ultras": a movement of hardcore football fans that was formed in 2005. Like many other independent civil society groups, the Ultras had been repressed by the security forces, which tightly controlled football matches and stadiums. Before the first

¹²⁷⁶ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹²⁷⁷ Ibid; Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹²⁷⁸ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹²⁷⁹ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹²⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹²⁸¹ Amar 2011b.

protests of 25 January, the Ultras reassured the demonstrators that they would protect them against the police.¹²⁸²

The demands of the organizers were relatively modest and reiterated the standard, reformist aims of the civil-democratic movement: *“the sacking of the country’s interior minister, the cancelling of Egypt’s perpetual emergency law, which suspends basic civil liberties, and a new term limit on the presidency that would bring to an end the 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak.”*¹²⁸³

25 January

No one expected the demonstrations to attract tens of thousands of ordinary Egyptians, let alone be the harbinger of revolution. *“We wanted to challenge the cops by protesting that day. A lot of people were surprised to see that we had more than 25,000 people at Tahrir that day and things escalated from there,”*¹²⁸⁴ shrugged youth activist Ahmed al-Gourd. *“Before the revolution it was a success to have 100 people demonstrating in the street. So we were laughing: tomorrow we will have a revolution,”*¹²⁸⁵ leftist journalist and member of the UESY Haisam Hassan recalled jokingly.

So I went to the street as a journalist to cover what would happen. I discovered hundreds of people walking in the street and this was unusual for Egypt... I was walking in the streets when I heard a voice shouting. I just got out of the metro, so I saw the most... I haven’t ever seen these numbers of police in the streets. No one was in Tahrir. Where was the people? So I went back to the newspaper and then I heard shouts; I saw hundreds of youth walking in the streets and calling “the people want to end the regime”. It was marvelous and I started to follow the youth in the street. We went from Talaat Harb Square until we reached Tahrir Square and then there were police officers and soldiers stopping us. The same happened in all streets near Tahrir Square. I couldn’t go to Tahrir and I thought that these were the only numbers of the revolution in the streets. I thought: “I can’t leave them”, because I didn’t know that there were thousands outside. So I went back with them from the streets to the square and through another street without soldiers, which led to the square. We were running as if thinking: if we get through this street without soldiers we will get our freedom. I was excited and I ran to be in the first

¹²⁸² Al-Werdani 2011.

¹²⁸³ Shenker 2011a

¹²⁸⁴ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

¹²⁸⁵ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

*line of the running youth and I saw Tahrir Square before them and I saw, oh my God, thousands! ...It was marvelous.*¹²⁸⁶

The political cartoonist Salah Abd al-Azim had originally planned his wedding on 22 January. When he heard of the protest organized on the 25th, he decided to delay his marriage to the 26th, so he could participate in the demonstration.

*I imagined it would only be one day of protests as usual. So I delayed my wedding to 26 January. So on 25 January we went to the protests. No one of my guests could make it to my wedding on the 26th, because half of them was protesting and the other half was escaping the police. [laughs]*¹²⁸⁷

*“The reason why 25 January became a mass protest was that it started from below, from the popular neighborhoods,”*¹²⁸⁸ claimed leftist activist Wael Tawfiq. The tactic to start the mobilization for a big protest from the poor areas was already developed during the anti-war demonstrations of 2003.¹²⁸⁹ This enabled activists to gather a critical mass of protesters before they arrived at Tahrir Square, as groups of only tens of demonstrators would get arrested easily by the police.¹²⁹⁰ The security apparatus was surprised by the massive turn-out and followed the events rather passively, at first.¹²⁹¹ Already at noon it was clear to some participants that the massive demonstrations could be *“an opportunity to bring down the Mubarak regime”*¹²⁹². In the afternoon Central Security forces tried to break up the protests with water cannons, sound bombs, batons, rubber bullets, and tear gas, and the peaceful demonstrations turned violent as protesters retaliated with rocks and bricks.¹²⁹³ *“We stayed for the evening in the streets and the image of the Tunisian revolution was in our mind.”*¹²⁹⁴ Central Cairo became a war zone with continuous street battles between police forces and tens of thousands of demonstrators. Protesters gathered on Tahrir Square, where they planned to make a stand against the riot police. During the late evening and night they were dispersed by

¹²⁸⁶ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹²⁸⁷ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

¹²⁸⁸ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹²⁸⁹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹²⁹⁰ Al-Ghobashy 2011.

¹²⁹¹ Jack Shenker in guardian.co.uk 2011a; Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹²⁹² Guardian.co.uk 2011a

¹²⁹³ Ibid.

¹²⁹⁴ Interview with Haissam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

Central Security Forces, however. Access to mobile phone networks and internet was gradually blocked.¹²⁹⁵

The protests in Cairo sparked off massive demonstrations in Alexandria and in major cities in the Delta, the Canal Zone and Upper Egypt. In Suez the protests were brutally repressed, leading to a fierce confrontation with the police. Labor leader Saud Omar emotionally recalled that: *“At 25 January there were three killed, at 26 January two, at 28 January there were eighteen youth killed. Between 25 January and 28 January it was relatively quiet in the whole country except for Suez, who had all these people killed.”*¹²⁹⁶

The Tension Builds

The morning after 25 January, downtown Cairo was empty of protesters.¹²⁹⁷ The Interior Ministry deployed thousands of riot police *“...on bridges across the Nile, at major intersections and squares as well as outside key installations like the State TV building and the headquarters of Mubarak’s ruling National democratic Party in central Cairo.”*¹²⁹⁸ As the 25th had been a holiday, the Ministry expected fewer protesters on Wednesday and was determined to forcefully crush any mobilizations of the activist “vanguard”. At noon, individual youth and small groups of demonstrators were rounded up in Tahrir.¹²⁹⁹ As the number of protesters swelled during the afternoon and the evening, the violence of the police and plainclothes State Security forces increased commensurably.¹³⁰⁰

Throughout the evening and the night, small rallies of a few hundreds of demonstrators were repetitively charged and broken up by police and plainclothes, only to regroup at another location and continue their protests.¹³⁰¹ Mobile phone networks, internet access and landlines were completely cut off. The websites of al-Dostour and al-Badil were taken down. In Asyut and Mahalla al-Kubra protests were swiftly disbanded, but in Suez *“...an angry crowd of about 1,000 people gathered outside the city’s morgue demanding to take possession and bury*

¹²⁹⁵ Guardian.co.uk 2011a

¹²⁹⁶ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹²⁹⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011b

¹²⁹⁸ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011b.

¹²⁹⁹ We are Khaled Said Facebook group in Guardian.co.uk 2011b.

¹³⁰⁰ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011b.

¹³⁰¹ Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011b.

the body of one of three protesters who died in clashes on Tuesday"¹³⁰². Violent clashes between the police and the population of the Canal Zone city ensued. Several civilians were killed and in retaliation protesters set fire to the police station and the local NDP headquarters.¹³⁰³ With both pride and grief Saud Omar recollected that: *"There are five police stations in Suez, we burned three of them. We burned a lot of police trucks... We burned the firemen station, because they were using the firemen trucks to transport weapons and kill protesters."*¹³⁰⁴

On the second day of the protests, the Egyptian political opposition started to voice its demands. Al-Sayyid al-Badawi, chairman of the *Wafd*, demanded a national unity government, the dissolution of parliament and new, fair elections – remaining completely silent on the spontaneously emerged aim of the movement: the removal of Mubarak and a complete end to the regime. Conversely, the National Association for Change, led by Muhammad al-Baradei, called on the President to step down and demanded that his son Gamal should not be allowed to run for president. Other groups stressed the demand to increase the national minimum wage and/or to fire the Interior Minister, Habib al-Adly.¹³⁰⁵

The morning of 27 January saw a return of calm in Cairo, as most activists prepared for a massive mobilization after the Friday afternoon prayers.¹³⁰⁶ New, spontaneous protests of hundreds of protesters took place in Suez, Ismailia and Alexandria.¹³⁰⁷ Thursday also saw the formal entrance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the protest movement, as Muhammad Morsi declared the participation of the Society in the demonstrations planned on Friday.¹³⁰⁸ The official statement read:

*The movement of the Egyptian people that began January 25 and has been peaceful, mature and civilised must continue against corruption, oppression and injustice until its legitimate demands for reform are met. We are not pushing this movement, but we are moving with it. We don't wish to lead it but we want to be part of it.*¹³⁰⁹

¹³⁰² Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011b.

¹³⁰³ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011c.

¹³⁰⁴ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹³⁰⁵ Al-Amrani 2011a.

¹³⁰⁶ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011c.

¹³⁰⁷ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011c.

¹³⁰⁸ Al-Masry al-Youm in Guardian.co.uk 2011c.

¹³⁰⁹ Muslim Brotherhood in Guardian.co.uk 2011c.

In the evening Muhammad al-Baradei arrived in Cairo, pledging his active participation in the protests of Friday. Yet the fact that he waited for three days after the first protests to return to Egypt gathered a lot of criticism in the streets: *“Only a smattering of well-wishers made it down to greet ElBaradei, a far cry from the scenes last February when the former UN nuclear weapons chief was met by more than a thousand supporters at the beginning of his triumphant return.”*¹³¹⁰

Friday of Anger

One of the main reasons for the success of the first demonstrations on 25 January was that their mobilization had started from working class neighborhoods. This tactic was repeated on the *Friday of Anger*, which became a pivotal moment for the revolution. Leftist activist Wael Tawfiq recollected the “snowball effect” of mobilizing in the working class areas:

*We agreed to meet in a place in Imbaba. Before we got there we ran into several, six or seven, youth who came out of a small mosque, using slogans such as “the people want to end the regime”. Our number reached twenty as we started to demonstrate in a poor neighborhood. The most important thing was the attitude of the normal people, demanding their rights, and continually asking others to participate. The demonstration in the poor neighborhood attracted thousands. When we reached the Kit Kat Square we found a huge number coming from the famous Mustafa Mahmud Mosque. I took my group and went to the square.*¹³¹¹

The Egyptian regime took the call for renewed protests on Friday 28 January seriously and prepared for the worst. From Thursday night on, all major ISPs were shut down and some 88 percent of Egyptian Internet connections were effectively blocked.¹³¹² Security forces and plainclothes police were mobilized on a massive scale: *“there were thousands of police on the streets, hundreds on every corner and they have been recruiting young men to help quell protesters.”*¹³¹³ As soon as the Friday prayers were finished, security forces launched a pre-emptive strike against (potential) protesters, using teargas, water cannons, and sound bombs.¹³¹⁴ This time, many activists were prepared for a confrontation with the police,

¹³¹⁰ Shenker 2011b.

¹³¹¹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹³¹² [Blogs.aljazeera.net](http://blogs.aljazeera.net) 2011a; Charles Arthur in Guardian.co.uk 2011d; Rashed 2011: 23.

¹³¹³ Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹³¹⁴ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

however, thanks to their experience on 25 January. Some of them had gotten advice from Tunisian revolutionaries: "...a Tunisian friend concluded that we could make a revolution on Friday and he sent us advice on what to do if they started to us tear gas: using cola and vinegar and onions."¹³¹⁵

Thousands of demonstrators started to clash with the police, not only in Cairo, but also in Alexandria, Beni Suef, Minya, Asyut, Ismailiya, Port Said, and al-Arish.¹³¹⁶ In the Delta city of Mansura some 40,000 protesters destroyed the NDP headquarters. The NDP offices in Damietta followed suit.¹³¹⁷ In Suez "...there were 80,000 people on the streets... in a region like Suez! There are half a million people in Suez, so there was twenty percent of the population in the streets."¹³¹⁸ The police station in the al-Arbain neighborhood was taken over and detained demonstrators were freed. Security forces seemed to have withdrawn from the city, as al-Jazeera reporter Jamal al-Shayyal claimed: "The police has been quite comprehensively defeated by the power of the people."¹³¹⁹ Al-Jazeera reporter Rawya Rageh observed protesters "arresting" police officers and beating some of them with their own batons.¹³²⁰ Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch described how in Alexandria the police just gave up fighting:

*The clashes lasted for nearly two hours. Then a much larger crowd of protesters came from another direction. They were packed in four blocks deep. Police tried to hold them back with teargas and rubber bullets, but they were finally overwhelmed... It is a very festive atmosphere. Women in veils, old men, children, I even saw a blind man being led. And there are no police anywhere.*¹³²¹

Central Cairo, however, was turned into a warzone between tens of thousands of protesters, who were trying to march on Tahrir Square, and the riot police who were attempting to block roads and bridges and to disperse the demonstrators with tear gas and rubber bullets.¹³²² Wael Tawfiq evoked a telling scene:

¹³¹⁵ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹³¹⁶ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011a; [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d.

¹³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³¹⁸ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹³¹⁹ Jamal al-Shayyal in [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d; [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011a.

¹³²⁰ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011a.

¹³²¹ Peter Bouckaert in [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d.

¹³²² [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d.

I encountered a huge number of people who were injured and who came from the Mustafa Mahmud Mosque, the gathering place from where also a lot of Mubarak supporters started their demonstrations. I noticed a lot of political activists. We began to walk in the Corniche. The police started to shoot on us and we went to the side streets. With every step we got more numbers from the streets. At 6 October Bridge we encountered a huge number of police, with a huge number of gas grenades. Then we went back to the Arab League street, Gama't al-Darwal. We found huge numbers, tens of thousands gathered there. At this moment the people pushed the police away from the streets. The policemen tried to block the roads to Tahrir Square. There were a lot of clashes. The most important clash was the one on the 6 October Bridge. We tried to go back to the square through al-Gal'a Bridge. On the way to Gal'a bridge we found another huge number of people. At this moment in my opinion we reached 100,000. We found some 5,000 people clashing with the police on the bridge. We told the policemen: "stop and surrender". We told them: "we will not hit you". The police leaders took their forces and withdrew and even left two trucks, and the people attacked the empty trucks. From al-Gal'a Bridge to Qasr al-Nil Bridge, the Opera neighborhood had a huge number of protesters. The policemen started to watch the side streets. Some of us were thinking about attacking the policemen, but most of us shouted "peaceful, peaceful!" In the entrance of the Qasr al-Nil square there were a lot of trucks awaiting us with gas grenades. The number of protesters was huge, which made the effect of the grenades more effective, because there was no room to retreat. The police tried to push the people back. Every one or two minutes a policeman was throwing four or five bombs, and then the people threw them back. I was afraid that with all these people the bridge could collapse. There was a continuous game of going forth and back between the police and the people. This is an important image in the revolution – the most important image in this day that made me realize that the regime was going down. We did not know what was happening at the other side, at Tahrir, but we were hearing a lot of grenades and noise and we were afraid that a lot of people were dying at the other side. And we thought that the number at the other side was less than ours. We had some 150,000 people on the bridge so there HAD to be less people in Tahrir. So we started to think that we had to make a lot of noise, making the police concerned about our number, and draw them to us. So they would stop shooting the other side. This mood made me realize that the regime was falling. I was afraid and the ordinary people were also afraid, but still they spontaneously took this decision. This lasted for twenty minutes and the people insisted on going to Tahrir and save the others. We went to the NDP headquarters. At this moment the most violent clashes started at the bridge.¹³²³

¹³²³ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

The NDP headquarters near Tahrir were set on fire.¹³²⁴ A curfew was ordered in the whole country, but it was largely ignored by the protesters.¹³²⁵ Ahmed al-Gourd, a youth activist, explained how the protesters defeated the security apparatus:

Usually the police tried to disperse the people in order to surround the smaller groups. That's what we did. We used their own tactics against them. We organized different focal points in different areas of the city, and most of these people marched on Tahrir. Some people did not even go to Tahrir, they had like their own shit going on in their own neighborhood. All the poor neighborhoods basically had their own huge protests, for example in Matareyya. So I can remember two main routes, one from Nasr City all the way walking, all the way along the Salah Selim road to Abasseyya to Ramsis Square to Tahrir. From the other, western side: Giza, Mohandiseen, Haram, Doqqi and even Helwan, they all converged on Qasr al-Nil bridge, entering Tahrir from that area. I was in front of the Ramses Hilton and we got everybody out in that neighborhood and started to push the cops back. The police in Downtown basically got surrounded and dispersed in a lot of different areas and they got pinned. And when they got pinned they unleashed all they got on the protesters.¹³²⁶

The police themselves began to lose consciousness because of the smog of tear gas in the streets and started to defect.¹³²⁷ Throughout the afternoon, it became more and more clear that the Ministry of Interior was not able to stem the revolutionary tide, as Hazem Kandil noted: *"Coming together from different assembly points, and gathering steam as they marched towards Tahrir Square, crowds snowballing to some 80,000-strong were now ready to take on the police. Caught off-balance by the size and persistence of the demonstrators, the police were finally overwhelmed."*¹³²⁸ By 17h, the police were defeated.¹³²⁹ Wael Tawfiq agreed that this moment was a turning point for the protesters in their street battle with the police:

After a lot of people were killed with trucks, and after the people who came from Ramsis and other streets had regrouped, there was the biggest demonstration of

¹³²⁴ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011a; [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d.

¹³²⁵ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d.

¹³²⁶ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

¹³²⁷ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹³²⁸ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹³²⁹ Rashed 2011: 23.

that day. This was the moment the police chose to surrender and go back to... we still don't know yet. [laughs]¹³³⁰

Because of the defeat of police and Central Security forces in the streets, Mubarak had to call on the army to restore order.¹³³¹ Tanks and APCs rolled into the centre of Alexandria, Cairo and Suez, where they were welcomed by demonstrators who hoped that the army would side with them against the police.¹³³² This episode evoked a moment in the story of that other great revolution:

Soon the police disappeared altogether – that is, begin to act secretly. Then the soldiers appeared – bayonets lowered. Anxiously the workers ask them: “Comrades, you haven’t come to help the police?” ...The police are fierce, implacable, hated and hating foes. To win them over is out of the question. Beat them up and kill them. It is different with the soldiers: the crowd makes every effort to avoid hostile encounters with them; on the contrary, seeks ways to dispose them in its favour, convince, attract, fraternise, merge them in itself.¹³³³

In general, the military did not intervene in clashes between protesters and police. They did, however, disperse a group of protesters who tried to storm the Maspero state television building, sealed off access to parliament and cabinet buildings, and took control over Tahrir Square.¹³³⁴ Wael Tawfiq recalled this episode:

There was a victorious mood when the army came to the square, but I did not trust them... The invasion of the square started. I was going to Maspero television building and thought about occupying it, but the army had already occupied it... The call to occupy the Maspero building was not successful, so I returned to Tahrir square where I saw that people were starting a sit-in, making homes in the square, and the main slogan was “the people want to end the regime”.¹³³⁵

At around midnight President Hosni Mubarak appeared on Nile TV, declaring that he would fire the government and appoint a new one on Saturday. In the

¹³³⁰ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹³³¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹³³² Ibid.

¹³³³ Trotsky 2001: 128.

¹³³⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹³³⁵ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

same breath, he warned the Egyptians that he would not condone any more chaos in the streets.¹³³⁶

Even though the army called on the population to respect the curfew, thousands continued to protest throughout Saturday 29 January in Cairo, Alexandria, Ismailiya, Suez and Damanhur.¹³³⁷ After the withdrawal of police forces from the streets, the revolutionary masses faced a new threat: criminal gangs, some of them escaped/released prisoners, and “thugs” who terrorized neighborhoods and looted houses, shops, and supermarkets.¹³³⁸ These attacks were widely covered by state television and framed as a consequence of the anti-regime protests.¹³³⁹ Blogger Issandr al-Amrani, however, criticized this type of coverage:

*There is a discourse of army vs. police that is emerging. I don't fully buy it — the police was pulled out to create this situation of chaos, and it's very probable that agent provocateurs are operating among the looters, although of course there is also real criminal gangs and neighborhoods toughs operating too.*¹³⁴⁰

Ad hoc vigilante groups were established during the evening and night in order to protect neighborhoods from the attackers.¹³⁴¹ The people, both in popular and wealthy areas, organized themselves to maintain order “...while plain clothes policeman [sic] try to create the impression of anarchy.”¹³⁴² At around 17h30, Mubarak appointed intelligence chief Omar Suleiman as vice-president and Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force commander and civil aviation minister, as prime minister.¹³⁴³ This move did not placate the masses, who continued their protests throughout the evening and the following day. Most banks, offices and shops remained closed.¹³⁴⁴

¹³³⁶ Nile TV in [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011d; Sallam 2011a.

¹³³⁷ Reuters in [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011e.

¹³³⁸ Associated Press in [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011e; [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011c; Rashed 2011: 23.

¹³³⁹ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011e.

¹³⁴⁰ Al-Amrani 2011b.

¹³⁴¹ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011f.

¹³⁴² Ibid.

¹³⁴³ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011e.

¹³⁴⁴ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011f.

One Million March

At noon on Sunday, new tanks rolled into Tahrir Square, fortifying the salient military presence in the heart of the revolution where some 20,000 protesters were still gathered, chanting slogans against the President and the regime.¹³⁴⁵ Reporting from Tahrir Square, Peter Beaumont, a journalist from The Observer, declared that: *"The mood amongst the people, who were very positive towards the army, does seem to be changing. People are very very suspicious of the army now. They want to know why a squadron of Egypt's best tanks is sitting in the entrance to square."*¹³⁴⁶

In a ploy to divide the revolutionary movement, Mubarak blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for the chaos and looting, and warned Egyptians that the Society was taking advantage of their genuine economic and political grievances.¹³⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood and four other opposition movements called for a temporary "national salvation government", headed by al-Baradei, which would organize an orderly transition towards democracy.¹³⁴⁸ In the evening al-Baradei arrived at Tahrir Square, where he got a mixed response. *"There were waves of excitement and optimism as he arrived. But a notable number chanted anti-al-Baradei slogans, asking 'how can you steal our revolution now?'"*¹³⁴⁹ At around midnight senior judges and scholars from al-Azhar University visited the dwindling number of demonstrators in Tahrir Square.¹³⁵⁰

On Monday 31 January most government offices, private businesses, banks, schools, and the stock market remained closed.¹³⁵¹ Some 200 protesters had remained on Tahrir, occupying the square, while chanting and reading poetry.¹³⁵² By the afternoon, the "hard core" of occupiers at Tahrir Square were again joined by tens of thousands of protesters, including women and children.¹³⁵³ Al-Jazeera estimated the number of protesters at 250,000.¹³⁵⁴ In Alexandria, Mahalla al-Kubra, Tanta, Kafr al-Zayat, and Fayum the revolutionary mobilization continued

¹³⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁴⁶ Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011f.

¹³⁴⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁴⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011f.

¹³⁴⁹ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011f.

¹³⁵⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011f.

¹³⁵¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁵² Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011d.

¹³⁵³ Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁵⁴ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011d. A general *caveat*: such numbers were highly speculative estimations.

as well, with thousands protesting. In Suez popular committees effectively controlled the city, organizing traffic and protecting neighborhoods.¹³⁵⁵

In the evening, a surprising statement came from the army, which pledged not to shoot at civilians staging protests against the President, although it warned that it would not tolerate violence and chaos.¹³⁵⁶ Vice President Omar Suleiman addressed the nation on state television, acknowledging the need for dialogue with the opposition, constitutional reform, fighting corruption and unemployment and an investigation into the November 2010 parliamentary elections.¹³⁵⁷ Suleiman's speech had little impact on the protests: *"The consensus seems to be that Suleiman's appearance was intended for USA consumption."*¹³⁵⁸ Activists called for a "one million march" on Tuesday and fixed Friday as a deadline for Mubarak's departure, or they would march on the presidential palace in Heliopolis.¹³⁵⁹

Late in the evening, the first attempt of the regime to organize opposition in the streets against the mass movement produced but a feeble crowd of around 300 demonstrators outside the Information Ministry. State television, however, paid a lot of attention to the event and claimed that the pro-Mubarak protesters numbered thousands.¹³⁶⁰ During the night, the last of Egypt's main Internet providers, *Noor*, was shut down.¹³⁶¹

In the morning of Tuesday 1 February, the army closed main roads and train services to Cairo *"...to prevent protesters from reaching mass protests today."*¹³⁶² State television tried to play on *"...fears that today's protest could lead to violence, insecurity, and looting like what happened on Friday. Again they are trying to convince people not to join protests."*¹³⁶³ Moreover, in order to create a semblance of societal polarization: *"The state owned television and the police are ordering their employees to stage pro-Mubarak protests and about a few hundred are now engaging in pro-Mubarak*

¹³⁵⁵ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁵⁶ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁵⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁶² Peter Bouckaert in Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁶³ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011e.

demonstrations outside the state owned TV building."¹³⁶⁴ Nevertheless, tens of thousands of protesters made their way to Tahrir Square until more than one million people were occupying Tahrir Square and its surrounding areas.¹³⁶⁵ The original plan of marching on the presidential palace, however, was abandoned. *"There are a lot of people who are against that because it's too far. And there is also a fear that if they leave the square, riot police will reoccupy it."*¹³⁶⁶ Some activists began preparing for a continuous occupation: *"...erecting tent [sic], bringing in blankets, food is being distributed, either for free or at discounted prices, music is being played... people are arranging entertainment to keep them occupied during the protest - a football tournament will be starting soon."*¹³⁶⁷ Anthropologist Samuli Schielke described the moving atmosphere at Tahrir:

*This day was one of the most amazing things I have ever experienced. It was perfectly peaceful, perfectly organised by spontaneous volunteers who took care of order, security, cleanliness. The people behaved in a very peaceful and reasonable way, and there was an amazing shared sense of dignity and power... Such pride, such determination, such sense of dignity, such sense of power, and such joy prevailed today in the centre of Cairo that I cannot write about it tonight without becoming very emotional. Not a moment for detached analysis.*¹³⁶⁸

Huge protests also took place in Alexandria, Suez, Ismailiya, Mansura, Damietta, Tanta, Kafr al-Shaykh, and Mahalla al-Kubra. Most people hoped that the massive scale and continuity of the demonstrations would be enough to force Mubarak to resign.¹³⁶⁹

At around 23h the President addressed the nation in *"...a rambling speech in which Mubarak tried to show empathy with the protesters but at the same time suggested that they have been manipulated by political forces (perhaps trying to implicate the Muslim Brotherhood, whose role has been minimal)."*¹³⁷⁰ Mubarak promised not to run again for president, which did not at all satisfy the disappointed crowd in Tahrir.

¹³⁶⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁶⁵ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011e; Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁶⁶ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁶⁷ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011e.

¹³⁶⁸ Schielke 2011.

¹³⁶⁹ Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁷⁰ Ibid.

“Erhal erhal’, meaning ‘leave leave’, the crowd in Tahrir Square continue to chant after Mubarak said that he will see out his current term.”¹³⁷¹

Amr Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League and one of the leaders of the opposition, called on the political forces to study Mubarak’s offer carefully, whereas a majority of parties and movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, rejected the proposal.¹³⁷² In Alexandria protesters clashed with pro-Mubarak supporters, a foreshadowing of the coming counter-revolutionary violence throughout the next two days.¹³⁷³

Battle of the Camel

On Wednesday morning, some twenty pro-Mubarak supporters clashed with the 1,000 protesters who had remained at Tahrir Square. *“People were becoming tired and there were few numbers in the square compared to other days,”* Wael Tawfiq remembered.¹³⁷⁴ A few hours later a few thousand pro-Mubarak demonstrators gathered at the Mustafa Mahmud Mosque in Muhandiseen and near the Maspero television building, chanting slogans in support of the President.¹³⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the army made a statement calling on the protesters to end their demonstrations as Mubarak had granted them important concessions.¹³⁷⁶ Internet services returned, al-Jazeera became available again, and the regime seemed bent on “normalizing” economic life after a week of protests.

At midday, Peter Beaumont observed that: *“Thousands and thousands of pro-Murabak demonstrators are now pouring into the square... It seems to have been heavily choreographed”¹³⁷⁷*. The army stood by and allowed armed Mubarak supporters to enter the square.¹³⁷⁸ Initially, the Tahrir occupiers were able to form a human chain, pushing back the pro-Mubarak “demonstrators” in a peaceful way. But then, by midday, the occupiers were suddenly attacked with rocks, Molotov cocktails, and knives.¹³⁷⁹ In a bizarre scene, some pro-regime forces charged with

¹³⁷¹ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011e.

¹³⁷² Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

¹³⁷³ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011e; Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁷⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹³⁷⁵ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷⁷ Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁷⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁷⁹ Abdel Kouddous 2011a.

riding horses and camels into the Tahrir occupiers: *“At one point, a small contingent of pro-Mubarak forces on horseback and camels rushed into the anti-Mubarak crowds, swinging whips and sticks to beat people. Protesters retaliated, dragging some from their mounts, throwing them to the ground and beating their faces bloody.”*¹³⁸⁰ Guardian journalist Jack Shenker commented: *“People continue to run away from the square. Many of them have got blood wounds. I could saw one man just brush past me carrying a child ... there appeared to blood on his chest.”*¹³⁸¹

Within the ranks of the pro-regime protesters operated a well organized and violent counter-revolutionary force with the single aim of sowing fear and terror among the Tahrir occupiers.¹³⁸² According to Samah Selim: *“The world is watching in awe - and anxiety - because, in these rare moments of unmediated and massive social upheaval, the naked power of the national security state is on show for all to see, in all its violence and unmitigated brutality.”*¹³⁸³ Egyptian blogger Sharif Abd al-Kouddous remarked that:

*These were not the same kinds of protesters that have occupied Tahrir for the last few days. These crowds were made up mostly of men, in between 20 and 45 years old. Many wore thick leather jackets with sweaters underneath. They chanted angrily in support of Mubarak and against the pro-democracy movement. They were hostile and intimidating.*¹³⁸⁴

Guardian journalist Jack Shenker identified them as: *“...government-employed thugs and ex-prisoners ..., alongside plainclothes policemen - though it would be misleading to suggest that these are the only people making up that side of these increasingly-violent rival demonstrations.”*¹³⁸⁵ New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who was present during the infamous “Battle of the Camel”¹³⁸⁶, wrote that:

In my area of Tahrir, the thugs were armed with machetes, straight razors, clubs and stones. And they all had the same chants, the same slogans and the same

¹³⁸⁰ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁸¹ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁸² Sallam, Stacher and Toensing 2011.

¹³⁸³ Selim 2011a.

¹³⁸⁴ Abdel Kouddous 2011a.

¹³⁸⁵ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁸⁶ A nod to the Battle of Bassorah in 656 between the forces of Ali and Aisha. Aisha led her soldiers from a camel carriage.

*hostility to journalists. They clearly had been organized and briefed. So the idea that this is some spontaneous outpouring of pro-Mubarak supporters, both in Cairo and in Alexandria, who happen to end up clashing with other side — that is preposterous. It's difficult to know what is happening, and I'm only one observer, but to me these seem to be organized thugs sent in to crack heads, chase out journalists, intimidate the pro-democracy forces and perhaps create a pretext for an even harsher crackdown.*¹³⁸⁷

Later, many of the pro-Mubarak forces were shown to be plainclothes Central Security police and rank-and-file NDP members.¹³⁸⁸ Nonetheless, some popular layers of the counter-revolution consisted of protesters who had switched sides after the President's speech on Tuesday night, arguing that the people's demands were met and that life should now return to normal.¹³⁸⁹

*They were happy that Mubarak has promised not to run for presidency and confident that there is going to be democracy and new parliamentary elections. They thought that Mubarak has heard the voice of the people, and that he shouldn't go immediately but there should be a period of well-ordered transition, and people should stop demonstrating and everybody should go back to work.*¹³⁹⁰

Despite the assault of the "thugs" or *baltageyya*, the anti-regime forces held their ground:

*Even though they were terrorized by the attack, there was a big resistance... After 18h we were gaining the upper hand and people were feeling stronger again. People felt that victory was near. After sustaining a lot of injuries, the attackers locked the streets to Tahrir square, and the defenders were on their own.*¹³⁹¹

By midnight the battle shifted towards the streets surrounding Tahrir Square and the area around the Egyptian Museum.¹³⁹² "Mubarak's "thugs" tried to torch the national museum so they can claim it was the protesters. The scheme failed miserably as the protesters defended the museum and reclaimed it by way of protecting it."¹³⁹³ A force of 2,000 anti-regime protesters succeeded in securing the area around Tahrir and the Museum, putting up barricades and stamping out fires from the regime

¹³⁸⁷ Nicholas Kristof in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁸⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011j; Sallam, Stacher and Toensing 2011.

¹³⁸⁹ Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁹⁰ Schielke 2011.

¹³⁹¹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹³⁹² Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011f; Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁹³ Haddad 2011aa.

supporters' petrol bombs.¹³⁹⁴ Yet throughout the night the battle continued to rage, with pro-Mubarak snipers and gunmen terrorizing the protesters.¹³⁹⁵

Tensions ran high in Alexandria as well, with supporters of the regime challenging the anti-Mubarak protesters, but *"...it's been threatening and ugly but nothing on the scale of civil war that seems to be erupting in central Cairo. People here are now extremely fearful and anxious; no one knows what the coming days will bring."*¹³⁹⁶

Thursday morning, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq apologized for the violence in Tahrir and promised an investigation into the events, but: *"One thing was clear after a night of fighting that left over 1,000 injured and several dead from gunshot wounds. That is that despite the denials of Egypt's government and interior ministry who claimed these events were not state-orchestrated, all the evidence strongly suggested otherwise."*¹³⁹⁷ A meeting between Vice President Omar Suleiman, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq and opposition leaders was boycotted by most political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³⁹⁸ Suleiman vacillated between describing the protesters as "youth with genuine demands" and "foreign infiltrators wishing to destabilize the nation".¹³⁹⁹

After the government spread the rumor that there were Israeli spies among the foreigners in Egypt, journalists – especially from al-Jazeera – were harassed by pro-regime supporters and then rounded up by the military "for their own safety".¹⁴⁰⁰ Others were arrested by agents of the Ministry of Interior.¹⁴⁰¹ The offices of HMLC and ECESR were raided and their directors, Ahmed Sayf al-Islam and Khaled Ali, were arrested by military police. *"The people were being beaten and the street had been told they were 'Iranian and Hamas agents come to destabilise Egypt' so the street was chanting against them."*¹⁴⁰² In Alexandria, Harriet Sherwood reported that: *"The situation here in Alexandria is now very difficult for journalists. Egyptian national TV has been broadcasting that there are Israeli spies*

¹³⁹⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁹⁵ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011f; Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹³⁹⁶ Harriet Sherwood in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹³⁹⁷ Jack Shenker and Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹³⁹⁸ Ian Black in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹³⁹⁹ Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰¹ Washington Post in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰² Ahdaf Soueif in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

disguised as western journalists, and people on the street are very suspicious."¹⁴⁰³ On the other hand, some cracks appeared in the state media as figures such as Shahira Amin from Nile TV resigned in protest of the regime violence:¹⁴⁰⁴ *"I quit my job because I don't want to be part of the state propaganda regime, I am with the people. I feel liberated and relieved. I have quit my job and joined the people in Tahrir Square."*¹⁴⁰⁵

Although the army began to clear the area around Tahrir of the 1,000 or so Mubarak supporters in the morning,¹⁴⁰⁶ around midday the pro-Mubarak forces started to throw stones at the 4,000 strong occupiers, without any intervention from the army.¹⁴⁰⁷ During the afternoon, however, it became clear that the Tahrir occupiers, whose numbers swelled to about 50,000 to 100,000, were routing the pro-Mubarak forces. *"Anti-government protesters are saying that if they survive tonight, the demonstration tomorrow will be massive. They are calling it departure day, the day Mubarak will be kicked out of office. Everything hinges on the next 24 hours."*¹⁴⁰⁸ Meanwhile, in an exclusive interview with ABC news, Mubarak indicated that, eventually, he would leave his post as president, but *"if I resign today there will be chaos."*¹⁴⁰⁹ Ironically, at the same moment, ABC journalists were carjacked and chased by pro-regime supporters.¹⁴¹⁰

The Time of the Pharaohs is Over

On Friday 4 February protesters hoped to force an outcome in the stand-off through the mobilization of the masses after the midday prayers. The slow withdrawal of international support for Mubarak, combined with the President's expressed desire to stand down "eventually", and their own victory in the Battle of the Camel, emboldened the revolutionary forces.¹⁴¹¹ Already in the morning people started queuing with thousands to get into Tahrir Square. By around midday, hundreds of thousands were gathered in Tahrir, with Muslims, Copts, and Catholics praying together. A sermon by Yussef al-Qaradawi, the exiled

¹⁴⁰³ Harriet Sherwood in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011g.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Associated Press and Peter Beaumont in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Simon Hardy in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴⁰⁹ ABC news in Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴¹⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁴¹¹ Ibid.

Islamist preacher, was broadcast: “O Pharaoh, the time of the Pharaohs is over... Millions of people don’t want you. As long as this man is there, Egypt will not be stable.”¹⁴¹² Opposition leaders such as Muhammad al-Baradei and Ayman Nur called on Mubarak to resign immediately.¹⁴¹³ Amr Moussa was more cautious and expected the President to remain in his post until presidential elections in September.¹⁴¹⁴ The atmosphere in the square was defiant, but festive.¹⁴¹⁵ Journalists and foreigners, however, were blocked from entering the square and continued to be harassed by military police and NDP members.¹⁴¹⁶ In Alexandria and Damanhur, more than 100,000 people were protesting.¹⁴¹⁷

At this point in the protests, specific democratic demands were raised by youth activists who wanted to concretize the spontaneous and abstract popular aim of the “fall of the regime” and shape a vision of a political future after Mubarak:

- ❖ *The resignation of the entire ruling party, including the new Vice-President Omar Suleiman, whom the Obama administration believes is best placed to oversee a transition of power:*
- ❖ *A broad-based transitional government appointed by a 14-strong committee, made up of senior judges, youth leaders and members of the military.*
- ❖ *The election of a founding council of 40 public intellectuals and constitutional experts, who will draw up a new constitution under the supervision of the transitional government, then put it to the people in a referendum. Fresh elections would then be held at a local and national level.*
- ❖ *The end of the country’s emergency law.*
- ❖ *The dismantling of the state security apparatus.*
- ❖ *The trial of key regime leaders, including Mubarak.*¹⁴¹⁸

Meanwhile, between a “rightist” faction of the political opposition, dubbed “the Council of Wise Men”, and a pragmatic group within the State, a consensus was

¹⁴¹² Al-Qaradawi in Guardian.co.uk 2011k.

¹⁴¹³ Guardian.co.uk 2011k.

¹⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

emerging on a “transition of power”, which entailed that Vice President Omar Suleiman would take over all presidential powers, while Mubarak kept the symbolic office of president for constitutional reasons until new elections.¹⁴¹⁹ In the next two days, talks between Vice President Omar Suleiman and opposition groups resulted in some concessions from the regime, such as the promise of the freedom of press, of the release of political prisoners, and of the formation of a constitutional reform committee.¹⁴²⁰ However, main opposition figures such as Muhammad al-Baradei and Ayman Nur criticized the meeting, and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood declared that the first condition for any negotiation was the resignation of Mubarak and free democratic elections.¹⁴²¹ Various youth groups operating in Tahrir Square rejected both the legitimacy and the outcome of the negotiations.¹⁴²² By Sunday 6 February, many observers agreed that the Mubarak-era was almost finished, but that “...*the spirit of his rule, the essence of his regime, and the methods of his era are far from over.*”¹⁴²³

The Week of Steadfastness

Even though the hopes of the masses for the swift resignation of Mubarak were dashed, they continued to occupy Tahrir Square, which was slowly transformed into a quasi autonomous “city of tents”.¹⁴²⁴ New York Times reporter Anthony Shadid observed that: “*Protesters have called this “the Week of Steadfastness,” and there is plenty here. But there is a sense of siege, too, with a lurking fear that the optimism of the people here may eventually succumb to grimmer realities.*”¹⁴²⁵ An al-Jazeera reporter in Alexandria noted the bewilderment of people faced with the President’s stubbornness: “*Some people are scratching their heads, wondering what more they need to do to make it clear to the president that they don’t want him.*”¹⁴²⁶

Despite the rainy and relatively cold weather, rumors of a forced evacuation of Tahrir drew in thousands of anti-regime protesters on Saturday 5 February,

¹⁴¹⁹ Guardian.co.uk 2011l.

¹⁴²⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

¹⁴²¹ Ibid.

¹⁴²² Ibid.

¹⁴²³ Nabil Shawkat in Guardian.co.uk 2011n.

¹⁴²⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

¹⁴²⁵ Anthony Shadid in Guardian.co.uk 2011n.

¹⁴²⁶ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011i.

strengthening the continuous occupation of the square.¹⁴²⁷ The government promised negotiations and did its best to steer the street back to “normality”. On Sunday morning 6 February, banks re-opened for business.¹⁴²⁸ Protesters, however, tried to convince civil servants working near Tahrir to strike and join the occupation.¹⁴²⁹ Vice President Omar Suleiman held a meeting with Muhammad al-Baradei, Naguib Sawiris, and representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Wafd*, *Tagammu*, and a number of youth groups.¹⁴³⁰ However, the negotiations only yielded vague promises.¹⁴³¹ Throughout the night thousands continued to camp out in Tahrir.¹⁴³²

On the afternoon of Monday 7 February, the regime promised public sector employees a raise in salaries and pensions of fifteen percent.¹⁴³³ More concessions followed the next day, as Vice President Omar Suleiman claimed to have a roadmap for the transition of power. He also promised that protesters would not be persecuted.¹⁴³⁴ The number of Tahrir occupiers had dwindled to a mere 1,000, and activists called for a new mass demonstration. Guardian journalist Chris McGreal commented:

*It is the first one since the government tried to get Egypt back to normality. It is another million man march as they like to call them. What is likely to bring people out is that the government is trying to pretend that the protests in Tahrir Square are no longer relevant and that the process has moved on to political negotiations.*¹⁴³⁵

Tuesday 8 February saw the return of hundreds of thousands to Tahrir.¹⁴³⁶ Some of the protesters visited the square for the first time. Jack Shenker observed:

As the streets appear safer and security more guaranteed, the numbers of those joining queues to enter Tahrir is growing, not falling - dozens told me today they were here for the first time. Politicking at the top may give the impression that the

¹⁴²⁷ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011i.

¹⁴²⁸ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011m.

¹⁴²⁹ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011j.

¹⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴³² [Blogs.aljazeera.net](#) 2011k.

¹⁴³³ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011n.

¹⁴³⁴ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011o.

¹⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴³⁶ [Guardian.co.uk](#) 2011p.

*uprising has lost momentum, but clearly for many in Egypt it's only just getting started.*¹⁴³⁷

In addition, the release of online activist Wael Ghoneim, one of the administrators of the Khaled Said Facebook group, on Monday 7 February, and his subsequent emotional appearance on Dream TV, galvanized new layers of youth, encouraging them to come to the square.¹⁴³⁸ Cairo University professors and students joined the protesters.¹⁴³⁹ Extending the mid-term break, Egypt's schools and universities remained closed in the following week.¹⁴⁴⁰ The cracks in the State propaganda machinery seemed to widen, with journalists from the pro-regime Rose al-Yusef striking against their editor.¹⁴⁴¹ Even former Minister of Transport, Essam Sharaf, came to Tahrir Square.¹⁴⁴²

Protests were not confined to Tahrir Square, but demonstrations also took place near government buildings, the People's Assembly, and the Shura Council. Moreover, in Alexandria, thousands of people protested in front of the Ibrahim Mosque.¹⁴⁴³ In regional cities such as Ismailia, Asyut, and Mahalla al-Kubra, mass actions were organized as well.¹⁴⁴⁴ In Suez, Port Said, and Ismailia, over 6,000 workers from the Suez Canal Company began an open-ended sit in.¹⁴⁴⁵ Thousands of employees of Telecom Egypt started to protest as well, demanding a ten percent pay rise and the resignation of the head manager.¹⁴⁴⁶ In the New Valley area, some 500 kilometers south of Cairo, 3,000 protesters went on the streets and clashed with security forces.¹⁴⁴⁷ In Asyut, 8,000 people, a majority of

¹⁴³⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁴³⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011n; Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011p. Although the impact of Wael Ghoneim should not be exaggerated, as Chris McGreal explained: *"I'd also just take issue with the statement that protesters say they were inspired to turn out by release of Wael Ghonim. Undoubtedly some were, but Tuesday is one of the two days a week when mass protests are scheduled and also a lot of the people I spoke to said they were there because they wanted to show the regime that they were not going to compromise in the negotiations - that Mubarak has to go. They planned to turn out anyway, Ghonim aside."* In Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁴³⁹ Guardian.co.uk 2011o.

¹⁴⁴⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁴⁴¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁴⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴⁴³ Guardian.co.uk 2011o.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

them farmers, set up barricades of flaming palm trees, blocking the main highway and railway to Cairo, contesting bread shortages.¹⁴⁴⁸ Even in remote areas, such as the desert oasis of Kharga, protesters confronted the CSF, attacking government buildings and police headquarters, and demanding the resignation of the provincial security chief.¹⁴⁴⁹

In the face of renewed mass protests and emerging strikes in the whole of Egypt, Vice President Omar Suleiman warned of the possibility of a coup if the current crisis continued. An end to the regime and the immediate resignation of the President was out of the question.¹⁴⁵⁰ However, youth movements such as 6 April and opposition groups remained adamant in demanding the instant removal of Mubarak.¹⁴⁵¹ Even the “complacent” Council of Wise Men acknowledged that: *“The regime’s strategy has been just to play for time and stall with negotiations. They don’t really want to talk to anyone. At the start of this week they were convinced that the protests were going to fade away.”*¹⁴⁵²

Day of Departure

Even though Thursday 10 February was considered by many activists to be a calm day in anticipation of the – by now “traditional” – massive demonstrations after Friday prayers, thousands were still occupying Tahrir Square.¹⁴⁵³ About 1,000 doctors in white coats joined the protests in Tahrir, while 3,000 lawyers gathered near Abdeen Palace, from where they marched to the square.¹⁴⁵⁴

Faced with the stubborn continuation of protests the army made its entrance as a direct power in the public sphere under the opaque shape of the “Supreme Council of Armed Forces” (SCAF). In an ominous¹⁴⁵⁵ “Communiqué no. 1”, the SCAF reassured the protesters that they were in control of the situation and that

¹⁴⁴⁸ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁴⁵¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁴⁵² Daa Rashwan in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁴⁵³ Guardian.co.uk 2011r.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011n.

¹⁴⁵⁵ *“When we saw this on television, we thought that this was the typical beginning of a coup.”* Personal communication with Peter Verkinderen on 1 June 2012.

all their legitimate demands would be met.¹⁴⁵⁶ The significance of the first SCAF meeting should not be underestimated, as Hazem Kandil explained:

*The Council is theoretically convened when the country is at war. So it was called into session in 1967 and 1973, each time chaired by the President as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces—that is, Nasser in the first case and Sadat in the second. So when the Council convened on February 10 without Mubarak, and a military analyst explained on television that it had met of its own accord, without an invitation of the Commander-in-Chief, or his presence, it was equivalent to a mutiny, announcing that the Mubarak regime was over.*¹⁴⁵⁷

Even though Mubarak had not yet formally resigned, the President had been sidelined and political decision making at the top level had, in practice, already shifted to the military.

State television radically changed its tone and coverage, showing the masses in Tahrir Square and accusing former ministers of corruption.¹⁴⁵⁸ Swiftly rumors spread that Mubarak would be announcing his resignation in the evening, or at least a transfer of power to Vice President Omar Suleiman.¹⁴⁵⁹ Triumph mixed with anxiety gripped the demonstrators in Tahrir as the prospect of Mubarak's removal from power was tainted with the fear of a military coup.¹⁴⁶⁰

At around 22h45, Hosni Mubarak addressed the nation. He repeated his commitment not to participate in presidential elections and he promised the eventual abolishment of emergency law. Yet he did not step down as President:

*Satisfied with what I have offered the nation in more than 60 years, I have announced I will stay with this post and that I will continue to shoulder my responsibilities... I never sought false power or popularity. I am certain that the majority of people are aware who Hosni Mubarak is.*¹⁴⁶¹

At the Square, anticipation transformed into anger, as demonstrators waved their shoes at the giant screen where the President's speech was projected.¹⁴⁶² After Mubarak's speech the words of Vice President Omar Suleiman did little to

¹⁴⁵⁶ Guardian.co.uk 2011r; Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011n.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Guardian.co.uk 2011r.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶¹ Hosni Mubarak in Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

¹⁴⁶² Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011n.

appease the masses: *"I call upon the young people and heroes of Egypt, go back to your houses, go back to your work."*¹⁴⁶³ Groups of protesters marched towards the state television headquarters at Maspero and towards the presidential palace.¹⁴⁶⁴ In Alexandria thousands of people rallied to the military base.¹⁴⁶⁵ The 6 April Youth Movement called for "an all out general strike" on Friday.¹⁴⁶⁶

Friday morning 11 February, the SCAF, in a second communiqué, again reassured the protesters that it would supervise a democratic transition, but it remained silent on the fate of the President.¹⁴⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Tahrir Square was filling up even before the start of prayer. Activists hoped to use this numerical advantage to mobilize people towards occupying and/or blocking other strategic locations in Cairo.¹⁴⁶⁸ At least 3,000 protesters gathered at the presidential palace, which was heavily guarded by the President's Republican Guard.¹⁴⁶⁹ Tens of thousands of people rallied at Maspero.¹⁴⁷⁰ In Alexandria the streets were packed with hundreds of thousands of protesters.¹⁴⁷¹ Tens of thousands surrounded government buildings in Suez, declaring that they would not leave until Mubarak stepped down.¹⁴⁷² There were also mass demonstrations in Mansura, Damanhur, Tanta, Mahalla al-Kubra, Asyut, Sohag, Beni Suef, Port Said, Damietta, Qena, and al-Arish.¹⁴⁷³

In the afternoon, Egyptian streets buzzed with the news brought by state television that a new "statement from the presidency" was to be expected in the evening.¹⁴⁷⁴ At 18h, a surprisingly brief declaration followed, given by Vice President Omar Suleiman: *"In these difficult circumstances that the country is passing through, President Hosni Mubarak has decided to leave the position of the presidency. He has commissioned the armed forces council to direct the issues of the state."*¹⁴⁷⁵ The accumulated anger and anxiety of the Egyptian masses suddenly metamorphosed

¹⁴⁶³ Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Guardian.co.uk 2011t.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.; Owen 2011.

¹⁴⁶⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011t.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011o.

¹⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷² Ibid.

¹⁴⁷³ Ibid.; Guardian.co.uk 2011t.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011u.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

into exhilaration and joy. On its Live Blog, Al-Jazeera dryly remarked: “No point any of our presenters trying to speak over the roar of Egyptians celebrating... Mubarak steps down. Brought to you live on Al Jazeera.”¹⁴⁷⁶ Jack Shenker participated in the celebrations at the Square:

*There was a complete eruption of humanity, I have never seen anything like it. The world’s biggest street party has really kicked off here. There are huge huge crowds of people jumping up and down suddenly as one. Suddenly everyone rushed into the road. I’m being slapped in happiness and bounced around.*¹⁴⁷⁷

At around 20h30, in its third communiqué, the SCAF acknowledged the resignation of Mubarak as President and committed itself to supervising a transition of power.¹⁴⁷⁸ The political intervention of the military was positively received among many activists. Wael Ghonim, for example, declared in a tweet that: “The military statement is great. I trust our Egyptian Army.”¹⁴⁷⁹ The “soft coup” was also explicitly sanctioned by the USA. President Obama praised the Egyptian army: “The military has served patriotically and responsibly as a caretaker to the state and will now have to ensure a transition that is credible in the eyes of the Egyptian people.”¹⁴⁸⁰

Continuation of Protests

Thousands of euphoric protesters remained overnight in the Square to celebrate Mubarak’s departure. On Saturday morning, however, the question arose as to whether the occupation of Tahrir should continue until there was more clarity about the promised transition to democracy.¹⁴⁸¹ The “hard core” of protesters argued that they should remain in Tahrir in order to pressure the SCAF for real reforms.¹⁴⁸² The main democratic demands that had emerged from the movement were the end of emergency law, the release of political prisoners, the formation of a presidential committee dominated by civilians, and of a constitutional committee, in addition to full freedoms for the press, syndicates, trade unions,

¹⁴⁷⁶ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](http://blogs.aljazeera.net) 2011o.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011u.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011v; Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁴⁸² Guardian.co.uk 2011v.

and political parties.¹⁴⁸³ Others were more confident in the people's power to mobilize and "check" the army, as pharmacist Ghada al-Masalmy claims: *"Now we know our place, whenever there is injustice, we will come to Tahrir Square."*¹⁴⁸⁴

On Sunday afternoon 13 February, in its fourth communiqué, the SCAF declared that parliament was dissolved and the constitution suspended and that it would run the country until presidential and parliamentary elections were held.¹⁴⁸⁵ It also called upon the population *"...to head back to work, and stop the strikes that have disrupted Egypt's economy."*¹⁴⁸⁶

The army started to forcefully clear the Square in order to allow traffic to flow through the heart of Cairo. Only 2,000 protesters remained in Tahrir, but thousands of demonstrators headed back to the Square when they heard that their comrades were treated violently by the military and that the Mubarak-appointed cabinet would remain in power.¹⁴⁸⁷ People spontaneously began to clean the streets, restore the broken pavements, and even paint the 6 October Bridge.¹⁴⁸⁸

The discussion within the revolutionary movement about whether to continue protesting or not, and the demobilization of a large part of the demonstrators and Tahrir-occupiers, showed that the first phase of the 25 January Revolution had ended. The direct, almost tactile goal of the mass movement – i.e. the removal of President Hosni Mubarak – had been completed. It was less clear, however, how the much more general-abstract demand for the end of *al-nizam* – the "regime", "power", or "system" – could be realized. Many protesters trusted the SCAF as transitory caretakers until elections would call a new constitution, civilian government, and parliament into being. Other demonstrators, mostly organized activists, were suspicious of the military's intentions – was the army not the main pillar of the regime? – and/or its capacities to successfully oversee a democratic transition. Already during the days of the uprising human rights activists had revealed the systematic detention and torture of political protesters by the military.¹⁴⁸⁹

¹⁴⁸³ Guardian.co.uk 2011v.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Guardian.co.uk 2011w.

¹⁴⁸⁶ Blogs.aljazeera.net 2011r.

¹⁴⁸⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011w.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Personal communication with Peter Verkinderen 1 June 2012.

¹⁴⁸⁹ McGreal 2011.

Furthermore, as the mass demonstrations seemed to subside, strike actions multiplied, creating another division in the revolutionary movement: between those who advocated far-reaching economic reforms along democratic changes; and others who saw an offensive workers' movement as a force of destabilization in a fledgling democracy. Lastly, the experience of Tahrir had shown many demonstrators and "occupiers" the vision of a democratic and just society that had organically emerged "from below". The blogger Sandmonkey mused: *"What if we create a democracy model similar to Tahrir, based on social engagement [sic] and collaboration without forcing anything on anyone?"*¹⁴⁹⁰

Hossam al-Hamalawy warned that: *"The war hasn't ended. The first battle of the revolution ended with Mubarak's stepping down from power, but the revolution hasn't been completed."*¹⁴⁹¹ Throughout 2011 and 2012 democratic and economic protests would continue to shake the Egyptian nation, while different societal forces began to (re)build themselves, (re)articulating their political and economic projects, and fighting for hegemony in the spaces that opened up in civil and political society after Mubarak's removal.

¹⁴⁹⁰ [Blogs.aljazeera.net](http://blogs.aljazeera.net) 2011s.

¹⁴⁹¹ Hossam Al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

CHAPTER 22

A Revolutionary Project

The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.

Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (2001: 18)

Protest or Revolution?

At the 2011 Middle East Studies Association Conference, there was ample discussion on the nature of the “Arab Spring” and the recent events in Egypt in particular. One of the issues that often haunted panel sessions was whether to label these events as a “revolution” or not – a question that was hastily banished from the conference room, because such an arcane debate would detract from the much more interesting analysis of what really happened on the ground. There is, of course, some justification for this attitude, as what matters is the process itself and not idle discussions on terminology. Yet, it was not academics or social scientists who first categorized the Tunisian and Egyptian chain of events as “revolutions”, but the protagonists themselves. “Revolution” was not a concept introduced from “without” by passive observers, but it emerged from “within”, by actors who tried to make sense of their own mass activity. This indicates that a debate on the concept of revolution is important in understanding these events, if only to comprehend the agents’ mobilization and usage of this term. One could say that definitions become truly important when people begin to define themselves.

The resistance against the categorization of the Egyptian mass protests as a “revolution” was also rooted in the Skocpolian tradition, which requires a revolution to entail not only “...*class-based revolts from below...*”¹⁴⁹² but also “...*rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures...*”¹⁴⁹³ of the social formation. At first sight, this definition seems satisfying because it emphasizes the dual nature of a revolution as a process of, on the one hand, sudden political and social change and transformation, and, on the other, the intervention of mass agency. Some social scientists were hesitant (or cynical) to categorize the 25 January protests as a revolution, because of the absence of any

¹⁴⁹² Skocpol 1979: 5.

¹⁴⁹³ Ibid. 4.

structural change. However, this approach poses a methodological problem as it turns a particular outcome of the process – “...*rapid, basic transformations...*” – into a determining parameter to characterize the entire process. If structural, political, and social change is a prerequisite for calling a modern revolution a revolution, this would mean that the character of a revolution could only be established *post factum*. For some social scientists, their patient could be suffering from revolution, but this diagnosis can only be proven when he either recovers or dies. Moreover, the widespread notion of a “failed” revolution becomes problematic. For example, the outcome of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was clearly a failure – the establishment of the Duma was a cosmetic rather than a structural change – yet among historians the event is generally accepted as a revolution. What is lost is the understanding that a certain process of “...*class-based revolts from below...*” may contain the potentiality or will to “...*rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures...*” without actually being able to realize it. Goldstone subtly corrects Theda Skocpol’s definition of “...*rapid, basic transformations...*” into “...*an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society...*”¹⁴⁹⁴ In my opinion, this nuance rightly shifts the attention from whatever outcomes a revolution may have to the process of revolution itself: the transformations in activity and consciousness that occur within the movement of the masses. Irrespective of its success or failure, the 1905 events in Russia constituted a revolution, because of the spontaneous mobilization of the masses and the structures of self-determination (soviets) that emerged from this movement. Insurrection, mass strikes, “occupations”, the conquest of State power, and/or the transformation of the social formation, are but moments within this broad process. Trotsky’s concept of revolution¹⁴⁹⁵ stressed the development of human self-determination through mass mobilization, organization, and politicization:

The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events... the masses... break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new régime. The history of a

¹⁴⁹⁴ Goldstone 2001: 142. My emphasis.

¹⁴⁹⁵ Throughout the chapters on the 25 January Revolution I regularly refer to Trotsky’s writings on the Russian Revolution of 1917, not because of the *particular* similarities between the two revolutions, but because of Trotsky’s insightful analysis of the process of revolution in *general*.

*revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.*¹⁴⁹⁶

The substance of revolution is the collective and collaborative activity of the popular masses, and how this activity acquires, step by step, self-direction and self-organization. The power of such a concept lies in its emancipatory appreciation of the power of human agency and self-liberation, as it places the activity of the revolutionary Subject at the heart of its analysis.

The “proof” of the Egyptian 25 January Revolution lies then in its salient mass mobilizations, its immanent political will – its “...effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society...” – and its spontaneous neoformations: citizen committees, the Republic of Tahrir, revolutionary parties, and independent trade unions. Mona al-Ghobashy asserted that: “The uprising restored the meaning of politics, if by that term is understood the making of collective claims on government. It revalued the people, revealing them in all their complexity...”¹⁴⁹⁷

The Revolutionary Subject

During the days of insurrection, Paul Amar criticized the three dominant ways in which the revolution was being framed in the media:

*There are three prominent binary models out there and each one carries its own baggage: (1) People versus Dictatorship: This perspective leads to liberal naïveté and confusion about the active role of military and elites in this uprising. (2) Seculars versus Islamists: This model leads to a 1980s-style call for “stability” and Islamophobic fears about the containment of the supposedly extremist “Arab street.” Or, (3) Old Guard versus Frustrated Youth: This lens imposes a 1960s-style romance on the protests but cannot begin to explain the structural and institutional dynamics driving the uprising, nor account for the key roles played by many 70-year-old Nasser-era figures.*¹⁴⁹⁸

These three binary models attempt to offer an analysis of the main protagonists and antagonists of the revolutionary process. They point towards an answer to the questions of which groups of the population were in the streets and for what reasons. To put it differently: who are the participants of the revolutionary project

¹⁴⁹⁶ Trotsky 2001: 17-18.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Al-Ghobashy 2011.

¹⁴⁹⁸ Amar 2011a.

that emerged from the 25 January protests? And as what social Subject did these actors constitute and define themselves?

The third frame was rooted strongly in discourses produced by both revolutionary and regime actors, who cast the youth as the prime mover of the 25 January Revolution. These discourses were grounded in the reality that it was indeed young men and women who initiated and spearheaded the protests.¹⁴⁹⁹ But, as Amar observed, their important role did not define the process as a “youth revolution”. Objectively, the protests were joined by young and old people, men and women, rich and poor, Christians and Muslims. Blogger Hossam al-Hamalawy noted that:

*All social classes in Egypt participated in the uprising from the first stages. Hosni Mubarak's regime succeeded in creating a state of alienation between it and all the social classes, with no exceptions. Even among the Egyptian elite except for those businessmen who surrounded HM [=Hosni Mubarak], were relieved when he resigned.*¹⁵⁰⁰

The sociologist Muhammad Bamyeh also stressed the diverse social composition of the revolutionaries:

*While the youth were the driving force in the earlier days, the revolution quickly became national in every sense; over the days I saw an increasing demographic mix in demonstrations, where people from all age groups, social classes, men and women, Muslims and Christians, urban people and peasants—virtually all sectors of society, acting in large numbers and with a determination rarely seen before.*¹⁵⁰¹

Moreover, the saliency of the diversity of the participants in the emerging revolutionary activity-system was expressed subjectively. The protesters swiftly recognized themselves as “the people”, and this consciousness was expressed, for example, in the by now familiar slogan of “*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*” – the people want the fall of the regime. Defining the revolution as a movement of the youth narrows its scope and undermines its legitimacy as a broad, popular activity-system, Jessica Winegar warned:

...transitional government figures have started referring to the uprising as a “youth” uprising and the demands of the people as demands of the “youth” in a

¹⁴⁹⁹ Al-Bendary 2011a.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

¹⁵⁰¹ Bamyeh 2011.

*familiar paternalistic way that diminishes not only the importance of what has happened, but also the demands that the vast majority of Egyptians, no matter their age, have of the post-Mubarak government.*¹⁵⁰²

Such a concept depoliticizes the movement and “...also makes it vague and gives it a certain color something that has become fashionable today, to give revolution a certain color, so there are orange, purple, jasmine revolutions and so on.”¹⁵⁰³ Furthermore, “the youth” is not a homogenous sociological category, as Rabab al-Mahdi pointed out:

*In this construct, the media and academic analysts lump together the contradictory and often conflictual interests of ‘yuppies’ (young, urban, professionals of the aforementioned connections and backgrounds) with those of the unemployed, who live under the poverty line in rural areas and slum-areas. Under this banner of “youth” the “yuppies” and upper middle-class young people are portrayed as the quintessential representative of this uprising.*¹⁵⁰⁴

The idealtype of the Egyptian revolutionary became a particular youth, such as the Google employee Wael Ghoneim, who, perhaps, reflected more the predominant social composition of the international media than that of the revolutionary actors.

The second frame of secularists versus Islamists has no roots whatsoever in the 25 January protests: it only became relevant with the referendum on the constitutional amendments on 19 March 2011, the parliamentary elections of the same year, and the presidential elections of 2012. The prevalent discourse, saliently expressed in slogans, graffiti and cartoons, during the days of insurrection was one of popular unity and against religious sectarianism. The symbol of the Crescent-and-Cross was omnipresent, representing unity between believers.¹⁵⁰⁵ Whereas religious activity played a small role in the mobilization of the masses – for example via the mass gatherings after midday Friday prayers or the rallying calls by some preachers – the social Subject that arose out of the protests did not put forward any religious or cultural demand. An a-religious

¹⁵⁰² Winegar 2011.

¹⁵⁰³ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Al-Mahdi 2011a.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Farida Makar explained that the history of the symbol dates back to the 1919 revolution, and that it had re-emerged in the month before the 25 January Revolution after the church bombing in Alexandria. (Makar 2011: 309)

notion of the legitimate will of “the people” was the main means of recognition of the masses.

This brings me to the first of the bipolar models that Paul Amar criticized; that of the “good people” versus the “bad dictator”. Amar was right to deconstruct both categories, as the people and the dictatorship are not homogeneous and static entities. Structurally, the “regime” not only consisted of different and often opposing factions, it also incorporated the various scales of dictatorship, ranging from the lowly bureaucrat to the regional governor, from the NDP worker to the GFETU representative, from the policeman in the street to the chief of staff, from the corrupt factory manager to international capital, from Cairo to Washington.¹⁵⁰⁶ Is a soldier who fraternizes with the protesters or an NDP worker who participates in a strike during the revolution, part of *al-sha’b* or *al-nizam*? The category of “the people” as well implies a heterogeneous gathering of actors from different social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds and from distinct age, sex, and belief groups. Moreover, “the revolutionary people” was far from being a stable, homogeneous category during the development of the revolution: its numbers increased and decreased with the ebb and flow of the mobilizations; and the allegiance of individuals shifted sometimes from participating in the protests to supporting Mubarak and vice versa. While there was a mass contestation of the regime, the population was not consistently and continuously united against the dictator. For example, in the *Week of Steadfastness* Schielke saw “the people” divided into three broad groups:

*One camp firmly supports the president, be it out of personal interest, out of belief in strong leaders, or out of fear of chaos. Another camp is critical of the president and the system but optimistic and ready to accept the concessions the government offered. Which way this camp turns in the next days and weeks will be decisive. And one camp, the revolutionary camp, either supports the demonstrators on Tahrir Square, or is standing there right now.*¹⁵⁰⁷

¹⁵⁰⁶ In his critique of the Stalinist Soviet Union, Leon Trotsky acknowledged that the “regime” was not simply the sum of the State and the ruling classes, but that “bureaucratism” entailed forms of activity and consciousness that were also entrenched in more popular layers of society. See Trotsky 1991.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Schielke 2011.

In contradistinction to the relatively small “hard core” of thousands of protesters whose revolutionary activity was incessant and relentless, the real mass base of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators was constantly in flux.

Instead of considering *al-sha’b* as an objective category synonymous to the population, I suggest that a subjective approach is more fruitful: *al-sha’b* as a developing activity-system or collaborative Project. Rather than a fixed historical agent that produces revolution, “the people” was constructed as a concrete political actor, as a social Subject, through its revolutionary activity. Alan Shandro sharply observed that: “*The forces of revolution are assembled only on the field of battle, in the course of hostilities, from whatever elements present themselves, drawn often from the ranks of opposing forces.*”¹⁵⁰⁸ The self-recognition of the actors who participated in the revolutionary activity-system as “the people” was not just a mechanistic reflection of its diverse and representative social composition – the “population” or the people *an sich* – it also constituted a re-appropriation and redefinition of the concept of *al-sha’b*. As Sherene Seikaly and Pascale Ghazaleh explained, the category of “the people” has changed throughout Arab history: “*The sha’b has gone from being a subject of idealization to an object of derision. The Arab people, in European and North American as well as Arab intellectual discourse, are passive, dormant, apathetic, and dependent on a strong leader. They are childlike.*”¹⁵⁰⁹ One of the biggest achievements of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions then is that they (re)constructed “the people” as a self-determining social Subject instead of a mere Object of authoritarian regime policies or traditionalist practices.

Just as the concepts of “the revolution” and “the regime” were not introduced from without, the notion of “the people” emerged spontaneously from the activity-system itself, which tried to grasp the nature of its own mass agency. For the protesters gathered in Midan Tahrir on the Friday of Anger, hearing more than a million people shouting “*al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam*”¹⁵¹⁰ was the concrete development and construction of “...an unmistakably obvious popular wil”¹⁵¹¹; and

¹⁵⁰⁸ Shandro 2007: 21.

¹⁵⁰⁹ Seikaly and Ghazaleh 2011.

¹⁵¹⁰ “*At times it seemed to me absurd that so many thousands of people could express their complex and diverse grievances in such simple, even reductive, terms. Then I realized that it could not be otherwise. Protesters came from all walks of life – rich and poor, devout and secular, old and young – and the only way their togetherness could be realized was through a simple yet powerful demand.*” (Rashed 2011: 26)

¹⁵¹¹ Bamyeh 2011.

the realization of “...the profound, almost spiritual, implication of the notion of “the people” as a whole being on the move.”¹⁵¹²

The 25 January Revolution was a system of activity becoming conscious of itself, a social Subject that asserted itself as “the people”.¹⁵¹³ Solidary participation in this activity-system created a specific Subjectivity of “being a revolutionary”, turning participants into revolutionaries. An understanding of the revolution and the formation of a revolutionary Project requires an analysis of the developmental process of the 25 January protests.

Revolution in Development

Protest and Guerrilla

Even though the seeds of this revolutionary Project were planted during the last decade by the civil-democratic and workers’ movement – in the form of the production of intellectuals, discourses, traditions and practices of resistance – its growth and development was immeasurably accelerated during the 25 January protests: “Before the revolution nothing happens and then during the revolution everything happens all the time.”¹⁵¹⁴ As Trotsky noted with regard to the Russian Revolution of 1917: “The dynamic of revolutionary events is **directly** determined by swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of classes which have already formed themselves before the revolution.”¹⁵¹⁵ The mass activity that develops in a SSoD of revolution does not follow a predetermined path, but is the outcome of a highly contingent collective and collaborative learning process:

The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis – the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations. The different stages of a revolutionary process, certified by a change of parties in which the more extreme always supersedes the less, express the growing pressure to the left of the masses – so long as the swing of the movement does not run into objective obstacles. When it does, there begins a reaction: disappointments of the different layers of the revolutionary class, growth

¹⁵¹² Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵¹³ The appropriation of “the people” as a coherent, active force by the revolutionaries also issued a challenge to those popular layers who remained at their homes, interpellating them to join the demonstrations and protests as part of “*al-sha’b*”.

¹⁵¹⁴ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁵¹⁵ Trotsky 2001: 18. Emphasis in original.

*of indifferentism, and therewith a strengthening of the position of the counter-revolutionary forces.*¹⁵¹⁶

A revolution is first and foremost a collective learning experience, whereby an emerging social Subject has to create those neoformations that allow it to overcome, step by step, through trial and error, the predicaments it faces. As Trotsky remarked, the capacity of learning and development of the masses within a certain phase of the revolution is not absolute. Every phase of the revolution has its own Zone of Proximal Development. The failure, at a certain point in its trajectory, to develop a suitable neoformation to deal with a specific situation limits its entire development. The movement runs into “objective obstacles” – although what is “objective” is not purely external to the activity-system, but rather the Subject’s (temporarily) inability to negate this predicament.

As a developing activity-system, the 25 January Revolution consisted of different phases. In a way, the very first phase was the slow formation of street and class politics in Egypt through the civil-democratic and workers’ movements of the last decade. These developments and experiences in practices and discourses of protest paved the way for the revolutionary mass mobilizations of January and February 2011. With the advantage of hindsight, most leftist activists stressed the importance of this drawn out, preparatory phase. Fatma Ramadan, for example, emphasized that she was “...not analyzing the revolution since 25 January, but since 2000, since the anti-imperialist movements and the social movements and the strikes. All the worker strikes, the continuous strikes since 2006 were an introduction to the revolution.”¹⁵¹⁷

However, the revolution as a Project of the popular masses really took off on 25 January 2011. Tuesday was a national holiday, so the following working day the social Subject already bumped into its first predicament: the continued mobilization of working families. The movement of revolutionary actors in the streets transformed from mass demonstrations into a game of cat and mouse between small groups of hundreds or thousands of demonstrators and the police. While this transformation was born out of an “objective” weakness – the decreased capacity for mobilization during working days – its guerrilla neoformation of constant, decentralized attacks and retreats played an important

¹⁵¹⁶ Trotsky 2001: 18-19. My emphasis.

¹⁵¹⁷ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011

part in the softening up of the security forces, which began to suffer from fatigue and overextension: *“What shifted the balance away from the regime were four continuous days of street fighting, January 25-28, that pitted the people against the police all over the country.”*¹⁵¹⁸

The Central Security Forces especially were organized for a massive, but short-term deployment, striking hard at a single point of resistance. They had the advantage of numbers and were used to surrounding and choking the localized, small-scale protests of the last decade. The uprising in Mahalla on 6 April 2008, for example, could be defeated as long as the protests remained confined to this one city. The massive demonstrations that happened in the whole of Egypt on Tuesday 25 January surprised the security forces and they were not able to simply “surround” and subdue them, as Elliott Colla observed: *“In 2004, when Kefaya began their first public demonstrations, the protesters were usually outnumbered 30 to one by Central Security Forces. Now the number has reversed—and multiplied.”*¹⁵¹⁹ But neither were they prepared for the activity of protracted “urban warfare”, which followed the mass mobilization of 25 January and which lasted until the Friday of Anger. The unemployed youth in Suez probably constituted the vanguard of this moment in the revolutionary process.¹⁵²⁰

Friday 28 January was a key moment in the development of the Egyptian Revolution, because of the salient reassertion of its popular mass character and the spontaneously emerging consensus that not reform, but the fall of *al-nizam* was the aim of the movement. The guerrilla neoformation of Wednesday and Thursday had kept the activity-system alive and operational, and its heroic and defiant prolepsis instructed the masses to return to the streets on Friday. From the revolutionary activity, a pattern would emerge, which established Tuesdays and Fridays as moments of mass mobilization and demonstration, while in between the movement was sustained by the occupation of Tahrir and other symbolic sites, and guerrilla warfare in the streets and neighborhoods.

¹⁵¹⁸ Al-Ghobashy 2011. The “Ultras” in particular played an important role by “holding the line” in neighborhoods such as Bulaaq, Giza, and Shubra. (Al-Werdani 2011)

¹⁵¹⁹ Colla 2011a.

¹⁵²⁰ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

Subjectness

The midday Friday prayers became a logical point of mass mobilization, since the masses were already “mobilized” on the streets at that moment. The power of the revolutionary call consisted in transforming these traditional religious gatherings into political activities. The redeployment, by millions, of the masses in the Egyptian streets had a profound impact on the consciousness of the participants. At that point most protesters realized that they really had the capacity to emulate the Tunisian experience and dispose of their dictator. They had already showed themselves as an implicit revolutionary force in-itself since 25 January, but now they became a bold and explicit power for-themselves. Even though some activists had hoped that the 25 January protests would be the harbinger of Mubarak’s fall, most participants in the first demonstrations “...didn’t think they could do this to Mubarak. At first the protest movement went to the streets to demand the resignation of Habib al-Adly of the Ministry of Interior. And then everything went as you know.”¹⁵²¹ Muhammad Bamyeh commented that:

*Removing Mubarak was in fact not anyone’s serious demand on January 25, when the relevant slogans condemned the possible candidacy of his son, and called on Mubarak himself only not to run again. But by the end of the day on January 28, the immediate removal of Mubarak from office had become an unwavering principle, and indeed it seemed then that it was about to happen.*¹⁵²²

The Friday of Anger was the point when people realized they were making a revolution.¹⁵²³ Leftist journalist Haisam Hassan recalled that:

*We realized that this was a revolution when the people started to shout “we want an end to the regime”, while Rifaat al-Said and the political parties were saying “this government should go away”. What the hell. We want to destroy the regime and you are talking about the government and Ahmed Nazif?! He was talking like Mubarak. And until Mubarak said that he would go away, Rifaat al-Said and a lot of political figures and parties said that this was not a revolution.*¹⁵²⁴

It is clear that the original object of the activity-system did not determine the development of the Project, but that it was rather the other way around: from the concrete development of the activity-system emerged its own goal. It was not the

¹⁵²¹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁵²² Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵²³ Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹⁵²⁴ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

organizers who chanted for the first time “the people want the fall of the regime”, but the non-organized protesters – who often participated for the first time in political protest – with the fresh and powerful image of the Tunisian Revolution in their minds.¹⁵²⁵ Guardian journalist Jack Shenker, who had been covering social and political protests in Egypt since a few years, was impressed by the sudden quantitative and qualitative development of the mass movement:

*Amid all this carnival atmosphere and euphoria, it's really easy to forget that this time 10 days [sic] it was really surprising to see anything more than 50 protesters on the streets chanting Mubarak slogans. Now by all accounts you have close to a million on the streets, holding up phenomenal placards, chanting that they want their president to go. It is such an incredible transformation.*¹⁵²⁶

At this point in the development of the revolutionary Project, the participants constructed themselves as “the people” against “the regime”, a social Subject with its own will and self-determination. This discourse was rooted in the salient presence of millions in the streets and constituted a semiotic battering ram against the legitimacy of *al-nizam*. The Mubarak State could no longer assert that it defended the “common good” and the “population in general” when its constituency was massively and explicitly out in the streets against its very existence. The last vestiges of hegemony were obliterated in the Friday of Anger protests, and the only options left for the regime were repression or structural change.

However, the avenues for repression became increasingly limited, because of the sound defeat of the security forces during the Friday of Anger by the masses. The army, which gradually replaced the police and CSF, was reluctant to forcefully repress the mass movement because of the effect of this course of action on its own troops. Moreover, it was one of the only State institutions left that still had an aura of legitimacy in the eyes of most protesters. The transformation of the military dictatorship into a police State under Sadat and Mubarak had gradually banned the army from the commanding heights of politics and the national economy, which, ironically, inoculated it against a direct association with *al-nizam* by the masses. By most participants, the army was seen as a force *outside* of the regime. This attitude would have dire consequences for the further development

¹⁵²⁵ Conversations with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, March 2011.

¹⁵²⁶ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

of the revolution, but I will return to the position of the army in *Chapter 25 The Counter-revolution*.

The Regime's Whip

From Saturday 29 January on, the withdrawal of the police from the streets, the release of prisoners, and the semi-organized looting, violence and vandalism, constituted a new predicament for the revolutionary masses. Firstly, the intimidation of families and the vandalization of homes meant that the activity of the popular Subject was directed from “demonstrating in the streets” to “securing their neighborhoods”. Secondly, the substance of the concept of revolution as a righteous and popular upheaval – a meaning that had emerged from the mass movement – was threatened by the regime-promoted interpretant of *fitna*: societal chaos. The neoformation that overcame this predicament in the revolution’s trajectory was the establishment of grassroots popular or civil committees, which were organized to protect families, homes, and neighborhoods. In themselves, these committees are neither “progressive” nor “reactionary” and their role varied from city to city and from area to area. The character of civil committees established in rich neighborhoods in Cairo such as Zamalek or Maadi was different from those in popular neighborhoods such as Imbaba, or in working class cities such as Mahalla al-Kubra and Suez. But as a general rule, those committees of which the activity was connected in one way or another to the broader Project of popular revolution constituted a continuation and neoformation of the revolutionary process. In fact, by withdrawing the police and forcing people to govern their own neighborhoods, they reinforced the Subjectness of the people as a self-directing force. Youth protester Ahmed al-Gourd candidly remembered this episode:

We were happy, trust me, we did not miss the police. Actually, that whole civilian neighborhood watch thing... a lot of people actually enjoyed that. Like: you live in a house and you don't know your neighbors and suddenly you know everyone from your street. Not only your own building, but the entire block. You meet people living in your own building, living in the building next to you, people living along the whole street, you start to get to know people, calling them to see if they are alright, you know. It was actually a way for people to get to know each other and it worked pretty good. And I think it was actually an awesome display of how people

*were self-aware of things like safety, there was no vandalism, no looting, people protected the library of Alexandria, people protected the Egyptian museum.*¹⁵²⁷

These small anecdotes showed that “...the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny”¹⁵²⁸ was not only a political activity-system, but also entailed “authentic” – i.e. less alienated and humanist – forms of living. The experience of the “Republic of Tahrir” constituted the high-point of this process, and will be discussed in the following chapter.

Wednesday 2 February became another key moment in the development of the revolution. After the mass mobilizations on Tuesday 1 February, Mubarak had promised some concessions to the protesters. Whilst the vanguard of the movement derided the President’s move, some protesters were satisfied by the concessions, or wanted to return back to “normalcy”. This moment had the potential to split the mass movement into a “moderate” and a “radical” wing. Political scientist Sabry Zaky claimed that Mubarak:

...had a chance to stay in power until September. In this case all the people would have called him the patron of democracy. After Tuesday when he made his speech that he wouldn’t stay in power after September, and after the statement of the military, I thought that... if Mubarak is intelligent enough, he will give us our freedom , saying that: “I see people are still in the Square and I will give your freedom to decide if I stay in power until September or if I leave now”. And I am sure he would have won. Because, in every society, the majority of 60 percent are fence sitters, all the time, and the 20 percent are the ones who make the revolution. He would have gotten 70 percent who said yes, continue until September. But thank God he was stupid enough. [laughs] He was stupid! I think it was not only a matter of stupidity but also of policy. The policies he used during his rule were the same policies that brought him down. He used to, all the time, to deal with demonstrations through the Interior Ministry, State Security and the Intelligence Service. The revolution began as a reform movement, not a revolution, so he ordered State Security and the Ministry of Interior to deal with it. When they failed he said I will deal with this issue. If you remember he didn’t deliver any speech until the fourth day. So, oh my God, security has failed, I have to deal with it myself... The security was in control and when they failed he stepped in. This same policy brought him down, because he left everything to the security apparatus until the reform movement turned into a revolution. So the ceiling of the demands became higher and higher and at the same time he had an opportunity when he

¹⁵²⁷ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

¹⁵²⁸ Trotsky 2001: 17-18.

*gave his speech and said: "I am not intending to remain in power after September"... I have seen many people in Tahrir cry when he talked about being buried on Egyptian ground. [laughs] My sister cried and asked me: "what do you want from him? Leave him alone." ...But we are lucky he didn't address the Egyptian people, if he had addressed them he would have made a referendum and he would have won it for sure.*¹⁵²⁹

Although it is doubtful that Mubarak in this phase of the revolution would have won a *genuine* referendum on his continuation of the presidency, or that the mobilization in the streets would have ended by such a maneuver, Zaky's analysis showed the doubt and confusion that held many participants in its grip at this juncture. Relatively large pro-Mubarak protests were held to discredit the powerful claim of the revolutionaries that they were "the people", sowing additional confusion in the ranks of the less politicized protesters. If the regime had restrained itself, temporarily exchanging the stick for the carrot, it would have considerably weakened the revolutionary activity-system.

However, at this very moment, the Ministry of Interior decided to organize a clampdown on the "hard core" or vanguard of protesters who had camped in Tahrir on Wednesday. Instead of further atomizing the movement, the attack on Tahrir by plainclothes and *baltageyya* in the surreal episode of the Battle of the Camel, reunited *al-sha'b* in its relentless opposition against *al-nizam*.¹⁵³⁰ In addition, paramilitary snipers connected to the Ministry of Interior began to terrorize the occupiers.¹⁵³¹ People who had been hesitating to continue their participation in the protests were appalled by the violence and felt "stabbed in the back."¹⁵³²

This episode is reminiscent of Marx's alleged aphorism that "...a revolution needs from time to time the whip of the counter-revolution."¹⁵³³ A Vygotskian reading of this epigram emphasizes that a predicament is not merely an obstacle in the life-process of a social Subject, but a crucial part of its trajectory, as it forces the Subject to create forms of mediation to overcome it, which in turn drives its entire development forward. If the Battle of the Camel established one thing in the consciousness of the masses, it was the necessity of struggling until the end of the

¹⁵²⁹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁵³⁰ Shokr 2011: 45.

¹⁵³¹ Maher 2011.

¹⁵³² Guardian.co.uk 2011j.

¹⁵³³ Trotsky 2001: 774.

Mubarak “regime”, because its oppressive existence could not be tolerated any longer. From Wednesday until Thursday the revolutionary vanguard stubbornly kept the activity-system alive, as Jack Shenker observed:

...we shouldn't lose sight of one basic and incredible fact – for the ninth night running, ordinary Egyptians are on the streets in their thousands, still bound together with remarkable social solidarity, still battling their three-decade-old dictatorial regime, still holding their ground even as it is rained on by rocks and molotov cocktails.

*Downtown Cairo is aflame tonight, its streets playing host to block-by-block, roof-by-roof, corner-by-corner urban warfare – but it's the bravery behind those fighting that battle that should really be leaving people open-mouthed.*¹⁵³⁴

The Will and the Means

Friday 5 February was dubbed the Friday of Departure, as an ultimatum to Mubarak. This episode expressed both the strength and the weakness of the revolutionary Project at that moment. Whereas the movement had been able to set its own concrete timetable and demands, it had not yet developed the means to enforce them. The original prolepsis of Tunisia, which had been instructive in the maturation of the 25 January protests, now became a brake on the activity-system, as its participants hoped that Mubarak would just leave, like Ben Ali, in the face of mass mobilizations alone. State institutions were paralyzed and disorganized due to the demonstrations and sit-ins, but they were not captured and transformed. What the movement lacked was a directive “center”, a “Prince”, which could instruct the activity-system towards the conquest of State power. “Without a guiding organization the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box,”¹⁵³⁵ Trotsky claimed. Schielke contemplated that:

The lack of organisation hat [sic] for a long time been the main asset of the movement because it could not be stopped by arresting or shooting its leaders – there are no leaders, and many of the people in Tahrir do not want leaders. They want power to the people. They want leaders elected in free parliamentary election. This grass-roots dynamics means, however, that while the demonstrators are well

¹⁵³⁴ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011i.

¹⁵³⁵ Trotsky 2001: 19.

*able to clean the garbage, to keep order, and to defend themselves – all actions that make immediate sense – they are not good at making tactical manoeuvres [sic].*¹⁵³⁶

From the first Friday of Anger on, there were activists who tried to rally and direct people towards occupying not only the symbolic location of Tahrir, but also “real” spaces of State power such as the Maspero television and radio building, the Parliament, the Presidential Palace, and the army barracks. During the Friday of Departure there was a renewed attempt to orient the masses towards a march on the Presidential Palace, but this call did not materialize.¹⁵³⁷

Without an offensive move from the revolutionary masses, its protests acquired the character of a war of attrition. In fact, this had been the strategy of the army since it appeared in the streets after the Friday of Anger. Instead of engaging the protesters headfirst, the military dug itself into “urban trenches” around key political and economic sites, such as the Maspero building, the Parliament, the Presidential Palace, roads, oil companies, and the Suez Canal. As long as these sites were firmly controlled by the State apparatus, it could endure the protests and wear down the demonstrators’ physical and mental constitution. Joshua Stacher noticed the fatigue that started to seep into the protesters’ ranks:

*People are tired of being cooped up in their apartments, made anxious as their stockpiles of food and money decrease, and they are ready for a sense of “normalcy” to return. Ironically, the normalcy they pine for resembles the police state so many tried to banish just thirteen days ago. This method of wearing down the non-protesting public seems just as strategic as the violence employed on those airing their grievances in the streets.*¹⁵³⁸

Shandro claimed that:

*...there can be no revolution without the threat of violence and the risk of terror, of panic and irresolution, of miscalculation and of crime... But the real danger in the logic of revolution and counter-revolution is that violence and coercion, hunger and fear, ambition and distrust would sap the nascent roots of proletarian-popular community.*¹⁵³⁹

¹⁵³⁶ Schielke 2011.

¹⁵³⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011k.

¹⁵³⁸ Stacher 2011a

¹⁵³⁹ Shandro 2007: 24.

In order to successfully challenge, capture, and destroy those levels of State power that are nationally and centrally organized; the popular Project struggled to overcome what was – and still is at the moment of writing – its most pertinent predicament: the fragmented nature of its self-directing activity. Whereas the majority of protesters remained stuck in the “Tahrir occupation strategy”, from Tuesday 8 February onwards some sections of the activity-system tried to develop a “second front” of occupation near the People’s Assembly.¹⁵⁴⁰ In addition, workers opened up a new dimension in the struggle by organizing strikes, while peasants mobilized in the countryside, dealing blows to the economic pillars of the regime.¹⁵⁴¹ The entrance of these new actors into the revolution and their often local fights in the economic sphere of the Egyptian social formation reinforced the political protests and opened up new lines of development and potential trajectories for the revolutionary Subject:

*Not all of these micro-dramas are explicitly political, and few of them will make headlines on their own. But they all add up to a growing sense that something fundamental is shifting in Egypt: people are no longer willing to accept the status quo power dynamics between themselves and their overlords, be they in the presidential palace or in the boss’s office next door.*¹⁵⁴²

These “economic” protests buttressed the “political” demonstrations and sit-ins, and fortified the revolutionary camp in its war of attrition.

The paralyzing effect of increasing strikes, occupations, and road blockades put an immense pressure on the State to enforce a swift solution to its own predicament. At this moment, the SCAF began to operate openly as a power independent from the presidency through the first of its “communiqués”. In his speech on Thursday 10 February, Mubarak, however, still refused to step down, even though he had implicitly handed power over to Vice President Omar Suleiman. This stubbornness in the face of mass mobilization pushed the revolutionary Project towards a resolution of the deadlock. Jack Shenker described this episode vividly:

At one point Mubarak made a reference to being a young man and understanding the young men of Egypt – basically the people who are here – and at that moment

¹⁵⁴⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁵⁴¹ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁵⁴² Guardian.co.uk 2011r.

the whole square erupted in anger... The way that Mubarak is comparing himself to the people on the ground infuriated them.

And when it became clear that... Mubarak intended to stay on until September, the square shook with fury. "We are not going until he goes," they chanted.

There is real anger and real fury and people are not quite sure in which direction to channel it. As I speak to you now, one man is holding a banner next to me which says: "Freedom or I die here." Tears are running down some people's faces. They really thought he was going to go.

There is a feeling that people want to get on the move now. I can hear this chant: "We'll go to the palace and tear him out."¹⁵⁴³

That last sentence is crucial as it shows the consciousness of the people that staying in Tahrir would not lead to a breakthrough in the stand-off between *al-sha'b* and *al-nizam*. The mobilization towards key sites of State power and legitimacy – in particular the Palace and the Parliament – and the explosion of strikes, prompted the military to intervene in the process. The only way open for the survival of the ruling classes was that the military placed itself at the head of the revolution, in order to defeat it. Before the laconic statement of Omar Suleiman that spelled the end of Mubarak's presidency, soldiers and officers were joining protesters at Tahrir, whilst people in the Square chanted that the army and the people were one.¹⁵⁴⁴ The confusion about the role of the army in Egyptian society among a majority of protesters, and the lack of a "center" of the activity-system, allowed the SCAF to step in and rescue those networks and institutions of *al-nizam* that served its interests. From the fall of Mubarak onwards, the intervention of the military "Savior-Ruler" constituted the main predicament of the revolutionary Subject, because it undermined the agency and self-determination of *al-sha'b* vis-à-vis *al-nizam*. Even though the majority of protesters were demobilized after the military's "soft coup", they still carried in them an awareness of their collective and collaborative capacity to bring down the Pharaoh – in Marx's words: "For a moment active heroes of the revolutionary drama, they could no longer be forced back into the inactive and spineless role of the chorus."¹⁵⁴⁵

¹⁵⁴³ Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

¹⁵⁴⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011t.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Marx and Engels 1969: 147.

The two main developmental challenges after the fall of Mubarak for the revolutionary Project were, firstly, the unification of the civil-democratic and workers' movements – i.e. the political revolution and the Mass Strike – and secondly, the objectification and centralization of the revolutionary Project into committees, parties, trade unions, and so on – i.e. the formation of a subaltern counter-hegemonic apparatus that could wage the inevitable battle for hegemony. I discuss this phase of “institutionalization” in more detail in *Chapter 26 The Revolutionary Prince*.

“Spontaneity” and Autoprolepis

One of the features of the revolutionary activity-system most celebrated by activists, journalists and political scientists alike, was its “spontaneity”. Muhammad Bameyh claimed that:

*...spontaneity was responsible, it seems, for the increasing ceiling of the goals of the uprising, from basic reform demands on January 25, to changing the entire regime three days later, to rejecting all concessions made by the regime while Mubarak was in office, to putting Mubarak on trial... Here one found out what was possible through spontaneous movement rather than a fixed program, organization or leadership. Spontaneity thus became the compass of the Revolution and the way by which it found its way to what turned out to be its radical destination.*¹⁵⁴⁶

As Rosa Luxemburg posited with regard to the Russian Revolution of 1905, the notion of spontaneity is crucial to an understanding of the revolutionary process “...because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them.”¹⁵⁴⁷ It is from the masses themselves that springs, in Trotsky’s words, “...that leaping movement of ideas and passions which seems to the police mind a mere result of the activities of “demagogues”.”¹⁵⁴⁸ A popular revolution is not engineered by demagogues, parties or activists, but it is the spontaneous activity of the people itself.

However, there is a tendency among some activists to oppose “spontaneity” to “organization” or “centralization”. This is a mystification of the concept, as spontaneity does not exclude organization or centralization: it rather addresses

¹⁵⁴⁶ Bameyh 2011.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Luxemburg 1970: 188.

¹⁵⁴⁸ Trotsky 2001: 18.

the **origins** of organization, coherence, and systematicity. Spontaneity then means organization from below, organically emerging from its own ranks, as Bamyeh illustrated:

*...popular committees in the neighborhood, with their rudimentary weapons and total absence of illusions, represented what society had already become with this revolution: a real body, controlling its present with its own hands, and learning that it could likewise make a future itself, in the present and from below. At this moment, out of the dead weight of decades of inwardness and self-contempt, there emerged spontaneous order out of chaos.*¹⁵⁴⁹

Schielke shared this view:

*The spontaneous organisation of Egyptians in demonstrations and in residential areas alike is for me the most powerful proof that Egyptians are capable of having a democratic rule. It is really amazing, and many people I speak with are extremely proud of this. Garbage is continuously collected at the demonstration and on the main streets by volunteers in a country that until now has been full of garbage anywhere you turn. People are guarding the streets where until recently they were dependent on and subject to a brutal and inefficient police force. If this momentum can be held, and turned into a constant dynamic, it will radically change Egypt.*¹⁵⁵⁰

“Spontaneity” refers to the immanence of organizational capacities in the popular masses who construct themselves as a social Subject. The popular Subject develops its own organizational competences through its revolutionary performances. Spontaneous structures are neoformations that arise in the processes of overcoming certain concrete predicaments:

*...for example governing how to communicate, what to do the next day, what to call that day, how to evacuate the injured, how to repulse baltagiyya assaults, and even how to formulate demands—emerged in the field directly and continued to develop in response to new situations.*¹⁵⁵¹

Revolutionary activity produced its own organic directive, technical, and cultural intellectuals. It created its own division of labor, rules, relations, artifacts and signs. In other words it acquired systematicity and coherence and became an

¹⁵⁴⁹ Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Schielke 2011.

¹⁵⁵¹ Bamyeh 2011.

activity-system.¹⁵⁵² The performances of this activity-system projected the image of a new, just and democratic society of self-governance:

*I saw patriotism expressed everywhere as collective pride in the realization that people who did not know each other could act together, intentionally and with a purpose. During the ensuing week and a half, millions converged on the streets almost everywhere in Egypt, and one could empirically see how noble ethics—community and solidarity, care for others, respect for the dignity of all, feeling of personal responsibility for everyone--emerge precisely out of the disappearance of government.*¹⁵⁵³

This was the autoproletic instruction of the revolutionary activity-system: “being revolutionary” was not only an instrumental activity oriented towards the overthrow of the regime, it was also a powerful foreshadowing of the possibility of direct and participative democracy and “authentic” life.

From this perspective, leadership and organizational centralization are not antithetical to the spontaneous self-determination of the masses, but rather a higher, more elaborate phase in the development of its systemic activity. The fact that the movement lacked a “center”¹⁵⁵⁴ was, in its early phase, rather a springboard than an obstacle. Without a center it was much more difficult for the

¹⁵⁵² I explore this dynamic in more detail in *Chapter 23 The Republic of Tahrir*.

¹⁵⁵³ Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Some authors, often in the Autonomist tradition, have celebrated the lack of centralization of the movement. For example, Nigam claimed: “*There is at the very least an exhaustion and weariness with the form of politics mediated by parties... To the party-form belongs the hijacking of popular initiative and will (or may we say, desire?), such as is expressed either in mass revolts or in elections. To this form belongs the history of 20th century totalitarianisms.*” (Nigam 2012: 173-4) Although I agree with the sentiment that party politics, in the narrow sense, have been discredited in Egypt (and elsewhere), one should not conflate the concept of an authoritarian or parliamentary party apparatus with the concept of a “hegemonic apparatus” and a “center”. As State power is *both* centralized and “capillary”, an anti-hegemonic bloc should develop the neoformations that enable it to transform the different scales and forms of the integral State. Without the construction of a “party” – in its broad, Gramscian sense of a “Modern Prince” – the revolutionary movement will never be able to confront the “traditional”, national institutions of the State. The problem of the Autonomist strategy is not only political, it is ontological, because it wants to negate the “...logic of representation...” (Nigam 2012: 174) In fact, this argument goes back to Hegel, who conflated *objectification* with *alienation*. In his critique of Hegel, Marx asserted that the processes of objectification and mediation in itself are “authentically” human, and that it is particular, historical forms of “representation” that were alienating. (See *Part I Methodology*) In short, there can be no politics without mediation; the real question is whether the revolutionary Subject finds authentic forms of mediation “in itself”, or through the colonization or commodification of another force.

State to defeat or recuperate the masses. However, when the SSoD of the activity-system required it to strike a decisive blow against *al-nizam*, this advantage turned into a disadvantage, as Sabry Zaky argued:

*This revolutionary process began without a leader. It is a kind of leaderless organization. It is like a starfish organization. When you cut any hand of the starfish it brings out another hand, if you cut it in half it becomes two starfish. This was very important at that time, to have a leaderless organization, because Mubarak failed to find someone to talk to. This was very important at that time. If he found someone he would have been able to buy time or to strengthen his position, but the strength of the revolution at that time was to be a leaderless organization. If you cut it from any side it brings back that side and swells all the time. But this is not alright now. Something that is an advantage at a certain moment can become a disadvantage at another time. In the beginning it was an advantage.*¹⁵⁵⁵

Like many other actors, Khaled al-Balshy shared Zaky's concerns:

*It will not be a revolution if things stay as they are now. What happened in Egypt in the revolution was that we did not have a leadership so there could not be negotiations with the regime to end the protests, which made the people stay in the square until Mubarak resigned. But this was also a bad thing, because we do not have a leadership to direct the movement and put forward a program for the future of Egypt.*¹⁵⁵⁶

The autoproletic instruction of the masses by their own activity was a crucial – but not the only – factor in the development of the revolutionary Project. Other actors assisted the popular activity-system in various ways.

Heteroleptic Instruction

Journalists and activists who engaged with the popular activity-system in a solidary way, played an important part in the development of the revolutionary Project. As explained in *Chapter 21 Story of a Revolution*, leftist journalists, Facebook and Twitter users, and civil-democratic activists initiated the Project by their call for protest on 25 January. Journalist and RS leader Mustafa Bassiouny, for example, remembered that:

¹⁵⁵⁵ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

*We tried to mobilize towards 25 January as we had mobilized towards the labor strikes and the protests against the torture of Khaled Said. We hoped that 25 January would become a big day of protest, because of the Tunisian Revolution, and that it would be the seed of the Egyptian revolution. We organized a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior and after the successful mobilizations of 25 January we started to organize ourselves for the revolution. On 28 January we realized the movement was taking the shape of a revolution.*¹⁵⁵⁷

There was a reciprocal relation between the “real”, physical mobilization in the streets and the virtual reproduction and dissemination of these actions, producing and reinforcing a “feeling” among the diverse participants in the emerging revolutionary activity-system that they “controlled the streets”.¹⁵⁵⁸ Even when the internet was shut down, when the independent media were repressed, and when the battle was primarily waged in the streets,¹⁵⁵⁹ progressive journalists and “virtual” activists played a role, as they were forced to go to the streets and support the masses there. Khaled al-Balshy, chief editor of al-Badil, recalled the participation of progressive journalists in the movement:

A lot of journalists were involved from the first day, 25 January. But there are two types of media: the one who supported the revolution and the one who resisted, the counter-revolutionary media. A lot of independent journalists were split. Dostour and al-Badil supported the revolution since the first day. The government blocked our sites... The newspapers and websites like al-Dostour and al-Badil played a big and good role, not only with news coverage, but they were helping to organize the revolution: where can we meet etc...

Within 24 hours after blocking our websites all our journalists were in the square, where we encountered other journalists of the opposition. The government transformed journalists into activists during the revolution by arresting journalists. On the first day in the square five journalists of al-Badil were arrested. So we were not only Egyptian citizens supporting the revolution, but also journalists supporting our colleagues, demanding their release. The government also transformed journalists into activists by attacking newspaper buildings...

A lot of journalists were participating in the revolution, even those of al-Ahram – which is a national [= governmental] newspaper – made a strike, occupying the

¹⁵⁵⁷ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Jack Shenker in guardian.co.uk 2011a.

¹⁵⁵⁹ Shenker 2011c.

*chief editor's office and changing the policy of the newspaper after the Friday of Anger.*¹⁵⁶⁰

Fatma Ramadan, leader in the SRC, asserted that leftist activists played a role during the revolution:

*Like all other forces the Left took part in the revolution. The Left had a big role in the youth alliance, the media and it had a role in the square, especially in establishing the stages. Like all other forces it played a role. We were also the ones who called for the protests in Imbaba and Giza.*¹⁵⁶¹

Gihan Shabeen of the SRC concurred:

*We had also a small journal from the beginning of the protests and our office was near of Tahrir Square and it became like the Mecca of the revolutionaries. This is how a very small group like ours can play a big role.*¹⁵⁶²

Tagammu leader Husayn Abd al-Razik admitted that the party leadership in Cairo had cut itself from the revolution, but that their youth had mobilized independently:

*Tagammu took the decision not to take part in the demonstration on 25 January but it allowed any member to take part in the protests. From the beginning, our youth organization, all of them, decided to take part and went to Tahrir Square and played a role in forming one of the alliances in Midan Tahrir. There were about three or four alliances, in one of them our youth organization took part and assisted them. Most of our members outside Cairo were the leaders of the demonstrations.*¹⁵⁶³

Journalist and Tagammu youth activist Haisam Hassan recalled that:

Rifaat al-Said said that we shouldn't go, because it was the feast of the police and there were police killed defending Egypt in 1952. So make it at 26 etc. The youth were refusing all his words, and in the other parties as well. We insisted at opening the party's building on the 25th and on Friday. We were inside the building, refusing to close it...

¹⁵⁶⁰ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

¹⁵⁶¹ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁵⁶² Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁵⁶³ Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

The first field hospital in Tahrir and mid-town was in Tagammu, in the youth union, with one of the doctors of the party, we made a room in the party itself and the first people who came to be treated were the soldiers themselves...

A lot of people in the streets did not have any consciousness. Without these actions and publications from Tagammu and other parties and the Ikhwan the people would have left the square after Mubarak said that he would fire the government. But it was not acceptable because he left the regime intact. Without these statements, this spontaneous organization, we would not have been effective in the streets. So we did play a role, an organized role of the party.¹⁵⁶⁴

RS leader Hisham Fouad summarized the role of the Left:

Who made the initiative to begin the first demonstrations. In this regard the Left played an important role, together with other groups. They played a role in the start of the revolution, but after Friday 28, it is a very broad movement and the Left was much too small to affect the movement. The Muslim Brotherhood with its one million members... The Left cannot affect it strongly. The revolution belonged to the people, there were no political groups that became leaders of the movement. All political organizations, left or right, were unable to catch the movement of the people in the streets, which went very fast. They constantly ran behind the events. All Leftists groups, however, participated in the movement.¹⁵⁶⁵

Already on the first Tuesday of Revolt, political activists distributed pamphlets that developed the demands of the popular masses. These texts shaped the consciousness of the emerging activity-system and offered it concrete objectives and methodologies. Firstly, they presented a generalizing expression to the shared experience and potential agency of the masses, in such phrases as: *"We have started an uprising with the will of the people, the people who have suffered for thirty years under oppression, injustice and poverty... Egyptians have proven today that they are capable of taking freedom by force and destroying despotism."*¹⁵⁶⁶ These slogans instructed the social Subject, "the people", about its political and economic predicament and its capacity to overcome it. Secondly, activists put forward concrete demands, for example the immediate removal of Mubarak and the government. Thirdly, they recommended instruments and methods to achieve

¹⁵⁶⁴ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹⁵⁶⁵ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011a.

these objectives: continuous strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations.¹⁵⁶⁷ Fourthly, activists distributed leaflets with practical and tactical advice for demonstrators, for example what to do when being attacked by tear gas.¹⁵⁶⁸

Those intellectuals who supported the popular activity-system in solidarity had to prove their sincerity by standing side by side with the protesters, who were suspicious of any form of “party politics”: “*We made a presence in the square with Tagammu, not by our words, but by sleeping in the streets, and so on.*”¹⁵⁶⁹ They quickly became part of the organic division of labor of the activity-system: “*Hani knows a lot about media and mixing sounds, so he will do this. Haisam knows about publishing papers and leaflets and talking about demands, so he will do that.*”¹⁵⁷⁰ This shared activity-system was governed by a dialectical pedagogy, as both the masses and the activists learned from each other, instructed each other, and developed each other as social Subjects.

Art as Political Instruction

Apart from these forms of instruction by the already existing “intellectuals” of the civil-democratic movement, artists, musicians, and especially cartoonists played an important part in expressing and interpellating the development of the revolutionary Project. Actor Muhammad Zaky Murat even claimed that: “*Art is the most effective tool in the whole world, because it is the easiest and fastest means to determinate the feelings of the people and to push them in the right way, in my opinion.*”¹⁵⁷¹ Salah Abd al-Azim, one of the caricaturists and artists who provided Tahrir with some of its most salient cartoons, described the role of art during the revolution:

I chose the middle of the Square to paint my cartoons, but the government of the Square... chose to put all my cartoons at the entrances of the Square. To make it visible for everyone coming to the Square. After taking Qasr al-Ayni streets and occupying the streets around the parliament and the Shura Council, we put one of the cartoons on the doors of the parliament.

¹⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷¹ Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

*The Egyptians had this emotion about Mubarak as the father of the nation for thirty years. This was so effective. After seeing these cartoons and these symbols, they are tearing down the idols inside themselves. The art and the cartoon is the most important shortcut to speeches, and articles and newspapers and opinions, to all of this...*¹⁵⁷²

This is an important insight: art is not only a reflection of the development of the activity-system; it is a form of mediation of the social Subject, a “shortcut” that elucidates, discloses or unpacks complex narratives.¹⁵⁷³ Furthermore, art was not only introduced from without in the activity-system, by “cultural intellectuals”, but artistic forms emerged from the movement itself. Classic songs of Fuad Negm and Shaykh Imam, such as “I am the People” and “I call on you” were sung and performed by protesters, alongside new and spontaneous creations.¹⁵⁷⁴ In his analysis of the poetry of the revolution, Elliott Colla concluded:

For the most part, these poems are composed in a colloquial, not classical, register and they are extremely catchy and easy to sing. The genre also has real potential for humor and play—and remind us of the fact that revolution is also a time for celebration and laughter...

Likewise, the act of singing invective that satirizes feared public figures has an immediate impact that cannot be explained in terms of language, for learning to laugh at one’s oppressor is a key part of unlearning fear. Indeed, witnesses to the revolt have consistently commented that in the early hours of the revolt—when invective was most ascendant—protesters began to lose their fear...

*This poetry is not an ornament to the uprising—it is its soundtrack and also composes a significant part of the action itself.*¹⁵⁷⁵

The fundamental role of art and the carnivalesque evokes Lenin’s appreciation of the creative potential of a revolution:

Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are capable of

¹⁵⁷² Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

¹⁵⁷³ Colla 2011a.

¹⁵⁷⁴ Antoon 2011b.

¹⁵⁷⁵ Colla 2011a.

*performing miracles, if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual progress.*¹⁵⁷⁶

However, he also added:

*But the leaders of the revolutionary parties must also make their aims more comprehensive and bold at such a time, so that their slogans shall always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendour and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute and decisive victory.*¹⁵⁷⁷

As the political activists were too weak and fragmented to guide an activity-system of millions of protesters, and the spontaneous forms of self-organization were only slowly developing, the revolutionary movement lacked a center that could direct its actions to “complete, absolute and decisive victory”. Especially during the last week, the frustration of activists and observers with regard to the incapacity of the activity-system to move towards the capture of key State institutions became apparent. Schielke wrote that:

*The revolutionary movement must be able to occupy the government media. That the television centre in Maspiro has remained firmly in the hands of the government has left a key instrument of power in the system’s hands. Actually the demonstrators in Alexandria even sent a message to Cairo, suggesting that the Tahrir demonstrators should occupy the TV centre. But to occupy it (it is less than a kilometre away) would require a carefully and secretly planned attack, and the pro-democracy demonstrators are both too peaceful and too spontaneous to take part in such an attack.*¹⁵⁷⁸

Jack Shenker observed that:

*There is no one leader; it has been a leaderless movement from the start and it still a leaderless movement here in the square. A huge amount of energy but not much of an outlet at the moment as to where it should be taken next.*¹⁵⁷⁹

Personally, I recall myself shouting at the television screen that showed al-Jazeera footage of Tahrir during the first Day of Departure: “Go, go now to the parliament

¹⁵⁷⁶ Lenin 1969: 125-6.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Schielke 2011.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011h.

and the palace!" There was a general sense of urgency that the Tuesday and Friday momentum of mass mobilization should not be allowed to evaporate, but channeled in a march on the State's institutions. As Samuli Schielke noted, however, the protesters – understandably – lacked the will for a confrontation with the entrenched military. The anger that gripped the protesters in the second Friday of Departure, when Mubarak refused to step down, opened up the possibility of a concerted move towards the capture of key State sites. Because of the weakness of political activists, cultural intellectuals were able to play a crucially directive role at this juncture. Salah Abd al-Azim explained to me that:

Within the days in which Mubarak insisted in staying in the presidential chair we said to everyone: "today he'll leave, or tomorrow". So I made a cartoon of Mubarak sitting in his chair and a lot of spiders climbing on it. As a symbol to say: "stay in your palace, don't move, and we will come to you". I made a lot of copies, small and big ones. Mubarak didn't resign in the first days. After the speech of Mubarak when he said I will remain in the chair, a lot of people carried small copies of the cartoon in a demonstration to Mubarak's palace. The biggest one is four to three meters, they carried it on a car and people wrote on it: don't leave, we're coming to you...¹⁵⁸⁰

Then, my translator, the leftist activist and journalist Haisam Hassan, chipped in:

When the audience saw the cartoons and pictures in the Square the people said: "yes that is what we wanted to say, he describes our feelings and our demands." A cartoon like: "don't leave we are coming" was like a message for all the people: "this is the time to do this, this is a good idea." When they saw this....¹⁵⁸¹

"...It made them move," Salah Abd al-Azim finished Haisam's sentence.¹⁵⁸² The lack of a directive center during the last days of the insurrection against Mubarak was temporarily overcome through the prolepsis of art, which literally imagined the next step in the development of the revolutionary Project. Massive demonstrations made their way to the Palace and the Parliament, and the only intervention that could interrupt their movement was the statement that Mubarak had resigned as President.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

¹⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸² Ibid.

The Shape of Things to Come

Revolution is not merely an instrument to accomplish societal change: it is the movement itself towards a transformation of society. The future social formation is not an object external to the revolutionary process, lying in wait until the masses finally “capture” it, but it is immanent to the revolutionary activity-system itself. The forms of self-organization, democracy, and authentic living that arise during the mass mobilizations and protests are anticipations of a fully matured society based on the self-determination and self-governance of the people. Bamyeh highlighted this discovery of authentic human relations and governance in the revolution:

Everyone I talked to echoed similar transformative themes: they highlighted a sense of wonder at how they discovered their neighbor again, how they never knew that they lived in “society” or the meaning of the word, until this event, and how everyone who yesterday had appeared so distant is now so close...

As the Revolution took longer and longer to accomplish the mission of bringing down the regime, protestors themselves began to spend more time highlighting other accomplishments, such as how new ethics were emerging precisely amidst chaos. Those evidenced themselves in a broadly shared sense of personal responsibility for civilization—voluntary street cleaning, standing in line, the complete disappearance of harassment of women in public, returning stolen and found objects, and countless other ethical decisions that had usually been ignored or left for others to worry about.¹⁵⁸³

The interiorization of the revolution also entailed a psychological struggle. The artist Salah Abd al-Azim poetically referred to this as “...tearing down the idols in themselves...”¹⁵⁸⁴ Guardian journalist Harriet Sherwood observed that:

People are eloquent about the reasons for their uprising. Many speak of economic hardship, lack of democracy, the desire for freedom. One of the most memorable comments in a day, a week, of memorable conversations comes from a guy who tells me he has come “to fight the fear inside me”.¹⁵⁸⁵

Muhammad Bamyeh noticed that:

¹⁵⁸³ Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵⁸⁴ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Harriet Sherwood in Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

*...spontaneity played a therapeutic and not simply organizational or ideological role. More than one participant mentioned to me how the revolution was psychologically liberating, because all the repression that they had internalized as self-criticism and perception of inborn weakness, was in the revolutionary climate turned outwards as positive energy and a discovery of self-worth, real rather than superficial connectedness to others, and limitless power to change frozen reality. I heard the term "awakening" being used endlessly to describe the movement as a whole as a sort of spontaneous emergence out of a condition of deep slumber, which no party program could shake off before.*¹⁵⁸⁶

Even during the first days of demonstrations, there were already subtle changes in the slogans of this vanguard of protesters, which pointed towards a development in the consciousness of the actors with regard to their own agency. Instead of chanting "we want change", protesters declared: "we are change".¹⁵⁸⁷ While this may seem trivial, it pointed to a crucial shift in the Subjectness of the activity-system: the slogan "we want change" implicitly addressed another actor who could achieve change for the masses. The aim expressed the formation of a popular Will – the people as wanting something – but not yet the agency of *al-sha'b*. This slogan could still be a part of the old Arab nationalist paradigm of corporatism and a moral economy, whereby the people demanded its negotiated rights from the Pharaoh. "We **are** change", however, forcefully rejects the mediation of the Ruler in the emancipation of the people.¹⁵⁸⁸ "Change" is no longer an object external to the activity of the people, that can be demanded and granted by another power: "change" **is** the self-directing activity of the masses. The realization that the people organized in the streets is the solution to its own problems is the realization of its political agency as a people: "*we don't need politicians, this is the people's revolution!*"¹⁵⁸⁹

¹⁵⁸⁶ Bamyeh 2011.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹⁵⁸⁸ After Mubarak's speech on Wednesday 2 February, Samuli Schielke contemplated the tendency towards liberation from the deeply rooted patron-client relation from a Freudian perspective: "*This is a recourse to a social ideology of patriarchal rule where the father is to be respected even in disagreement. This is a shrewd strategy that employs some deeply rooted sentiments among the people, but the sentiments of many Egyptians have changed in a strikingly Oedipal manner. M. says that this revolution is really a Freudian father murder par excellence. By symbolically killing the authoritarian father of the nation, people are gaining their independence as full persons.*" (Schielke 2011)

¹⁵⁸⁹ In Schielke 2011.

In a famous aphorism, Marx stressed that: “*To be radical is to grasp things by the root.*”¹⁵⁹⁰ However, the revolutionary consciousness of a new society remained largely an intuition or “good sense”, which tried to grasp and make sense of the developing experience of self-emancipation. The “idea” of self-governance was taking shape in articulation with the prolepsis of the revolutionary activity-system and the development of a critique of *al-nizam*. During the 25 January insurrection days, *al-nizam* came to express all that was structurally wrong with the Egyptian social formation, but this was still a “pseudoconcept” – a listing of the undesired properties and attributes of the system: corruption; violence; authoritarianism; poverty; and so on. A true concept of *al-nizam*, of the political economy that governed them for decades, allowed the masses to aspire societal change that was not merely cosmetic, but radical. Moreover, a true concept of its own revolutionary activity permitted *al-sha’b* to act as a self-governing body.

The articulation of a “theory”, or “philosophy” of the Egyptian revolution required the building of a Revolutionary Prince. Even though the formation of this Prince became more explicit after the fall of Mubarak – in the shape of the practico-critical activity of new popular parties, trade unions, and centers – its development was already rooted in, on the one hand, the civil-democratic and workers’ movement of the last decade, and, on the other, the neoformations that emerged from the revolutionary Project itself: civil and strike committees, and the “republic” of Tahrir. During the days of insurrection, the most powerful prolepsis of the “shape of things to come” emerged from the self-organization in Tahrir, of which the salient image continuously attracted and interpellated fresh layers to the social Subject of “the people”. I discuss the dynamic of Tahrir as the vanguard of the revolutionary process, a Project within a Project, in the following chapter.

¹⁵⁹⁰ Marx 1992: 251.

CHAPTER 23

The Republic of Tahrir

The brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures.

Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts: Private Property and Labor (1992: 365)

The Activity of Tahrir

During the first days of protest, Midan Tahrir turned into a stronghold for the revolutionaries, the site where they entrenched themselves to collectively withstand the attacks of the riot police. The centrality of this particular square in the revolutionary process was “overdetermined” by its symbolic and spatial characteristics. Firstly, “Liberation Square” referred to the 1919 uprising against the British, which secured partial independence. Thus it became a favorite gathering place for national events: *“Egyptians have poured into Tahrir to celebrate soccer victories, to mourn the passing of national icons, and to protest injustice.”*¹⁵⁹¹ In 2003 it became the symbolic locale of political mobilization, when demonstrators occupied the square for ten hours in protest against the war in Iraq. Secondly, the *midan* constituted *“...a major transport hub surrounded by vital elements of the state apparatus: the parliament, several ministerial buildings, and the imposing Mogamma’...”*¹⁵⁹²

Ahmed Shokr observed that: *“When protesters arrived at Tahrir on January 29, they did not come with the intention of creating a radical utopia... As the revolution unfolded, Tahrir was elevated from a rally site to a model for an alternative society.”*¹⁵⁹³ Apart from being a mere site of mass protests, Tahrir also increasingly morphed into an activity-system in its own right: a “freed zone”¹⁵⁹⁴ within the belly of the dictatorship. Through its self-governance and authentic life, Tahrir became the practical negation of *al-nizam* and a “microcosm” of the whole revolutionary Project. Its salient activity not only defied the regime, but projected an alternative to the current social formation.

¹⁵⁹¹ Shokr 2012: 41.

¹⁵⁹² Rashed 2011: 23.

¹⁵⁹³ Shokr 2012: 42.

¹⁵⁹⁴ As declared by the occupiers themselves. (Rashed 2011: 34)

Roughly four “leading activities” developed the Square into the Republic of Tahrir, of which the importance continuously changed according to the circumstances: demonstration; occupation; festival; and governance. **Demonstration** or protest was the first mode of activity that emerged in the Square on 25 January. It involved people walking towards Tahrir chanting slogans and songs, and carrying home-made placards and signs. Even though this activity was explicitly directed outwards, against the regime, it presumed a degree of internal, “spontaneous” organization. The confrontation of protesters with security forces that tried to clear the Square precipitated the activity of **occupation**, which, in turn, produced forms of living and governance. Independent leftist activist Wael Tawfiq described the transformation of the Square during the Battle of the Camel:

In the first five or six days it was a fresh movement and it became a normal attitude to be in the square... Before the camel battle people were eating, sleeping and working in the square. The Egyptian media represented us as an isolated group, as a closed community inside the square. The camel battle transformed the atmosphere and attitude inside the square. It started at 14h and it lasted until 18h. It came after the first statement of Mubarak. At that point some people were still sympathetic towards Mubarak: he is an ill and feeble man, he will retire eventually, etc. People were becoming tired and there were few numbers in the square compared to other days. Even though they were terrorized by the attack, there was a big resistance. It was revealed that being in the square was effective, after six days of little change. After 18h we were gaining the upper hand and people were feeling stronger again. People felt that the end victory was nearby. After sustaining a lot of injuries, the attackers locked the streets to Tahrir square, and the defenders were on their own. The most important image of this day was that the square transformed into organized working groups. Everyone in the square was organized. Girls, women, even the girls with a niqab. All of them were united without thinking about ideology or religion. Everyone did what he could to his ability. I had a broken arm so I started to break rocks to help others. The women with the niqab were carrying the rocks. A lot of people removed their jackets to carry rocks, even if they got cold. We established a group for military planning...

The camel battle changed the atmosphere. Before the attack when a man was injured he went to hospital and stayed at home. But now people who were injured immediately returned to the square after seeing a doctor. We started to make a civil

*prison of the revolution. In the first days when we arrested a policeman we handed them over to the army, but they released them. So now we made a prison.*¹⁵⁹⁵

The predicament of the attacks interpellated a spontaneous social division of labor within the occupying activity of Tahrir. Firstly, the “borders” of the Square – the Front¹⁵⁹⁶ – had to be defended. Secondly, occupation implied that protesters not only had to develop tactics to “militarily” secure the “free zone”, but also a daily life routine: securing food and shelter, treating the wounded, washing clothes, setting up stations for mobile charging, et cetera.¹⁵⁹⁷ This autonomous survival and life in the Square was realized through a continuous exchange of solidarity with the revolutionary Project “outside” Tahrir:

*Many of those arriving brought fresh bread, water, fruit and other supplies, and the atmosphere was relaxed. Long lines formed at tables of people handing out tea and bread. Around the square were makeshift clinics, set up in the entranceways of stores, including a KFC. At one, a man received an injection in his arm. Above another was the sign of an interlocking crescent and cross.*¹⁵⁹⁸

Guardian journalist Jack Shenker observed that this solidarity created a **festive** awareness of participation in the same revolutionary Project: “As fresh waves of protesters broke through police cordons to join the throng in Tahrir, a festival atmosphere took hold – groups were cheered as they arrived carrying blankets and food, and demonstrators pooled money together to buy water and other supplies.”¹⁵⁹⁹ Drawing from his own expertise and experience, Samuli Schielke claimed that:

*As an anthropologist who has long worked on festive culture, I noticed a strikingly festive aspect to the revolutionary space of Tahrir Square. It is not just a protest against an oppressive regime and a demand for freedom. In itself, it is freedom. It is a real, actual, lived moment of the freedom and dignity that the pro-democracy movement demands.*¹⁶⁰⁰

Even though the objective of the revolution, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, was grim, the liberating feeling among Tahrir occupiers that they could organize their own lives independent of the system, and that they were part of a

¹⁵⁹⁵ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Rashed 2011: 25.

¹⁵⁹⁷ Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

¹⁵⁹⁸ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011k.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Jack Shenker in Guardian.co.uk 2011a.

¹⁶⁰⁰ Schielke 2011.

system of solidarity, allowed for the “festival of the oppressed and exploited”¹⁶⁰¹. The occupation of Tahrir did not only develop strategies for survival, but also ways of enjoying life.¹⁶⁰² People sang, discussed, prayed, told jokes, fell in love, got married, and spent their honeymoon in the Square.¹⁶⁰³ On Tuesday 8 February, Jack Shenker vividly described life at the Square:

*It's so difficult to convey the atmosphere of this place through words or images; Tahrir may have dropped down the international media agenda somewhat in recent days, but honestly if you go down there and just stare around you - at the picnicking families, the raucous flag-wavers, the volunteer tea suppliers, the cheery human security cordons, the slumbering bodies curled up in the metal treads of the army's tanks, the pro-change graffiti that adorns every placard, every tent, every wall space in vision - it's impossible not to feel as moved as we all did in the very first days of this ongoing revolution.*¹⁶⁰⁴

As collective life requires **governance** in one way or another. As the State was forcefully driven away from the space of Midan Tahrir, forms of self-governing emerged organically from the activity of occupation: “Daily struggles to hold the space and feed its inhabitants, without the disciplined mechanisms of an organized state, were exercises in democratic process. It was through these everyday practices that Tahrir became a truly radical space.”¹⁶⁰⁵ Apart from the daily administration of the Square, occupiers “...break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new régime.”¹⁶⁰⁶ British actor Khaled Abdallah, who was among the protesters in Tahrir, declared that:

*Midan Tahrir has a system that works, it has borders that it can protect, it has its ways of feeding itself, it has ways to sleep, it has ways to bring people in and out safely. It has now become like a mini state that works and will function as long as it needs to in order to get what this country deserves.*¹⁶⁰⁷

Blogger and activist Omar Robert Hamilton described the grassroots political dynamic of the “Republic of Tahrir”:

¹⁶⁰¹ See Lenin 1969 in the previous chapter.

¹⁶⁰² See Rashed 2011.

¹⁶⁰³ Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁶⁰⁵ Shokr 2012: 44.

¹⁶⁰⁶ Trotsky 2001: 17.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Khaled Abdallah in Guardian.co.uk 2011m.

A revolutionary, organic, engaged, democratic [sic] space has emerged in Tahrir Square. Numbers swell and fall throughout the day, people come and go, but intense and sophisticated political engagement remains a fixture. From debates about the relative merits of parliamentary vs presidential systems, to proposals about constitutional [sic] reforms, to suggested programmes of political [sic] transition, there is only one thing on everyone's mind. Some debates are held around the numerous microphones, with crowds cheering or booing the speaker's proposals. Some are held in small circles on the ground that attract passers by [sic] eager to listen or voice an opinion, all are open to everyone to participate.

... whatever happens, for the first time in decades, there is a space in Egypt that is home to total freedom of thought and expression and political creativity... A new society has taken root in Tahrir, and it won't [sic] be driven out until the people have won their freedom.¹⁶⁰⁸

Amina al-Bendary emphasized that the significance of the governance of Tahrir was not only its self-administration, but also the vision, the imagining of an alternative to *al-nizam*, which it entailed:¹⁶⁰⁹

...they agree that together they are Egypt, and they agree that they imagine and demand a better future for themselves and their offspring, and they agree that better means free. The protestors in Liberation Square are not fighting for limited, direct demands — higher salaries, fewer taxes, more perks. They are fighting for values such as freedom and dignity. And they understand this to mean self-rule, democratic representative government, human rights, a dignified life.¹⁶¹⁰

Self-governance was interiorized as a new ethics by participants of the Project. For example, as Gihan Ibrahim of the RS explained, the experience of the Square transformed people's attitude towards sexual harassment:

People changed through the experience of being in Tahrir or being part of the revolution. Really, of the 18 days I was in Tahrir I felt no harassment whatsoever. I was among strangers and people I never seen in my life, of all walks of life, poor, rich, elites, middle-class, upper-class, different religions, all age groups, it didn't matter. I never felt safer, I didn't get harassed. Before, I was getting harassed daily when just walking down the street. Any woman goes through it in Egypt. It was through the collective struggle and this experience of fighting in Tahrir Square together that shed away all these stereotypes and dogmas that we are being trained

¹⁶⁰⁸ Omar Robert Hamilton in Guardian.co.uk 2011o.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Also see Rashed 2011.

¹⁶¹⁰ Al-Bendary 2011a.

*to think. And it was out of this experience that people changed the ways in which they think. Because the day that Mubarak stepped down and people came to visit or came to look and see Tahrir for the first time, that's when sexual harassment towards women was there again. It was because it was being done by other people. Those who had gone through the experience of the revolution, of the awakening of consciousness of equality between age, or class or religion. They didn't experience that. They were still back in the Mubarak days basically. People were changed through the experience.*¹⁶¹¹

Nawla Darwish of the NWF acknowledged the emergence of a revolutionary ethics towards women,¹⁶¹² and Fatma Ramadan of the SRC saw in the joint struggle of men and women a prophetic instruction of gender equality:

*Women played a big role, just like the men in the revolution. One look at the Square proves it. Women from all tendencies, leftists, politicized, non-politicized, even al-Ikhwan or the Salafists women, were present. It did not only have an impact on the consciousness of women, but also on that of the men. During the days of the revolution in the Square, they were together, close together, in the Square, and there were no cases of harassment. One of the Salafi leaders came on the stage and said: "I apologize for the women who are not wearing the veil", because he thought that they were bad women, but after he talked and discussed a lot with them, he apologized because he found that they had a high political consciousness. That was great.*¹⁶¹³

Revolution is not an abstract, mystifying force that liberates women; it is the concrete shared activity of men and women, coming together in struggle, solidarity, and self-governance, which has a strong emancipatory potential, because it confronts and instructs the participants as essentially **human** persons.

Intellectuals of the Square

The logic of the occupation demanded the creation of certain functions that secured the continued existence of life in the Square. Muhammad Zaky Murat summarized the various directive, cultural, and technical functions that were developed to answer the needs of the activity-system:

¹⁶¹¹ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁶¹² Conversation with Nawla Darwish, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹⁶¹³ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; See also Rashed 2011: 24.

This continuous presence made it necessary for us to create a substitution for life and society in the square. In order to hear each other within the millions we had to create a sound system, so we needed specialists with expertise in sound systems. They were using electricity from the State without permission because they stated that they owned the country and its electricity as well. So if there was an electricity engineer in the Square he played his role as an electricity engineer. While the thugs attacked the people in the Square we moved a lot of vehicles to the boundaries of the square and we couldn't do this without a lot of mechanic engineers who showed us how to do it. A lot of times the people in the Square panicked and all the artists in the Square played the role of continuing the spirit of the revolution by songs and poems, and the role of entertaining the people in Tahrir Square. For example, the role of musicians, in addition to the cartoonists. We didn't know them but we saw their works in the Square. They increased awareness inside the people and created a lot of new symbols and ideas by their drawings. Within the life of the Square we needed security. The only security means we had was the media. We had to give the media a message every day. So the artists inside the Square made a new art, a new shape, which was to write the demands and symbols in the soil, the land, the rocks, the stones. This was a message, not only to the media, but also to the people outside and inside the Square in order to change the Square into the real society we were dreaming of. The most important practical thing we all agreed about was the security and the cleaning of the Square. And the healing of the injured. Of course the doctors played an important role. This is a brief overview of the life in the Square.¹⁶¹⁴

In order to address an audience, the Square needed a sound system. In order to heal the wounded, the Square needed doctors. "Traditional" intellectuals who possessed the relevant know-how and who participated in the activity-system became technical intellectuals of the revolutionary Project. On the other hand, the Square produced its own "organic" technical intellectuals in the shape of cleaners, security, et cetera. The festival of revolt was supported by established artists who joined the protests, and amateur cartoonists, actors, and singers who emerged from the activity of Tahrir itself. These cultural intellectuals not only provided entertainment, but also reflected and refracted the revolutionary Project in particular semiotic objectifications that were interiorized "back into" the developing social Subject. The art of the Square was its material consciousness and constituted an articulation as well as an active shaper of political awareness. Menal Khaled of the cinema workers union, recalled that: *"We were supporting the*

¹⁶¹⁴ Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

popular movement that was a real revolution. We created two stages in the square. One for the actors, the other for the professional workers, we were supporting popular people's consciousness."¹⁶¹⁵

In addition, the Republic of Tahrir interpellated its own directive intellectuals:

*Every political power in the Square made its own stage in the Square to distribute its ideas and ideologies. These stages were named after the political forces. But the artists and actors and musicians made a big stage in the Square and called it the Revolution Stage in order to produce this artistic message in the revolution. The one who wants to give a speech about his son who was killed in the Square will do this in the Revolution Stage. Everyone was allowed to participate on this Stage.*¹⁶¹⁶

Intellectuals giving leadership and direction to the movement consisted of both those activists who had been a part of the political community before the revolution, and the leaders who materialized spontaneously within the ranks of protesters.

The Republic of Tahrir brought together political activists, artists and the masses in a shared system of solidary activity. There was a dialectical pedagogy of activists and artists becoming part of "the people", and the people becoming involved in politics and artistic production. The cartoonist Salah Abd al-Azim contemplated that:

*The Egyptian artists had a big problem in connecting with the people. Most Egyptians didn't see any art or knew any artists and for many Egyptians it was the first time to see artists in action, and for artists it was the first time to have a mass feedback and audience through the Square.*¹⁶¹⁷

Projecting Change

The activity of Tahrir not only entailed a collaborative *project*, in the sense of people coming together and working towards a self-defined goal, but also a collaborative *projection*, meaning that the revolutionary activity of the Square was a form of proleptic instruction for the whole revolutionary process. Occupiers themselves were conscious of their instructive role in the revolution and the

¹⁶¹⁵ Interview with Menal Khaled, Cairo, 25 March 2011.

¹⁶¹⁶ Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

¹⁶¹⁷ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

importance of their “leading activity” for the rest of the movement. Even after the first day of protest, Tuesday 25 January, activist Ahmed Salah claimed that:

*We must hold Tahrir through the night and tomorrow, so that every corner of Egypt can take us as an inspiration and rise up in revolt... It's a matter of life and death now – what happens over the next 24 hours will be vital to the history of this country. It's a very emotional moment for me.*¹⁶¹⁸

With regard to the Battle of the Camel, Wael Tawfiq, observed that: “*The resistance and organization of Tahrir influenced the whole of Egypt and transformed the meaning of Mubarak's speech.*”¹⁶¹⁹

As the vanguard of the revolutionary movement, Tahrir called to its representatives from local activity-systems of resistance in Cairo neighborhoods and other Egyptian cities and regions. In Tahrir they enjoyed the freedom to debate the strategy of the movement and the future of Egypt.¹⁶²⁰ They carried this experience of direct democracy and self-governance with them when they returned back to the local sites of protests, sharing and diffusing the prolepsis of Tahrir.

Tahrir captured not only the imagination of Egyptians, but through al-Jazeera and other international media its projection reached the living rooms of the global community. Schielke pondered:

*...if this revolution has taught me one thing is that the people of Egypt do not need to look up to Europe or America to imagine a better future. They have shown themselves capable of imagining a better future of their own making (with some important help from Tunisia). Compared to our governments with their lip service to democracy and appeasement of dictators, Egyptians have given the world an example in freedom and courage that we all should look up to as an example. This sense of admiration and respect is what has drawn so many foreigners to Tahrir Square in the past days, including myself.*¹⁶²¹

The Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon compared the significance of the Republic of Tahrir to the Paris Commune:

¹⁶¹⁸ Ahmed Salah in Guardian.co.uk 2011a.

¹⁶¹⁹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 8 March 2011.

¹⁶²⁰ Omar Robert Hamilton in Guardian.co.uk 2011o.

¹⁶²¹ Schielke 2011.

The Paris Commune lasted for 71 days and didn't end in victory, but it became a potent symbol and produced a new political form. Al-Tahrir, too, was "working, thinking, fighting, bleeding -- almost forgetful, in its incubation of a new society, of the cannibals at its gates -- radiant in the enthusiasm of its historical initiative." Those heroes [sic] in Cairo "were ready to storm the heavens." The earth they shook will suffice for now as they stand at the heart of (l)iberation, surrounded by millions.¹⁶²²

And just like the Paris Commune, the prolepsis of Tahrir inspired movements globally, from the *Indignados*, over Occupy Wall Street and workers' strikes in Wisconsin, to student demonstrations in the UK and the Greek protests on the square of Syntagma, to "fight like an Egyptian".¹⁶²³

¹⁶²² Antoon 2011c.

¹⁶²³ Shihade, Flesher, and Cox 2012: 5.

CHAPTER 24

Workers and the Revolution

Gansch het raderwerk staat stil, als uw machtige arm het wil
(The entire wheelwork will stand still, if your mighty arm will)
Albert Hahn, Great Dutch Railway Strike Poster, 1903

Anticipating Revolution

Gihan Ibrahim of HASHD and the RS asserted that the 25 January Revolution was fuelled by a strong undercurrent of class struggle:

*...it has always stemmed from a class struggle, but in addition to the class struggle there was the obvious repression and corruption that everybody faced no matter what class, age, or sex or background or location... everybody faced the corruption of the Mubarak regime and this was a main drive for the revolution. But the class struggle has always existed in the background. You saw it in Mahalla, in the working class throughout the whole of Egyptian history.*¹⁶²⁴

RS leader Mustafa Bassiouny concurred and stressed the importance of the 6 April 2008 uprising in Mahalla as an anticipation of the 25 January insurrection:

*We cannot separate the event of 25 January from what happened with the whole labor struggle since the last ten years. The first uprising was on 6 April and this had a labor background. The great number of worker strikes from 2006 had a big impact on the social consciousness in Egypt.*¹⁶²⁵

Political analyst Sabry Zaky claimed that:

...workers played a key role in this with their strikes in their work-places. During this period they ignited this revolution and it is very important to talk about the economic indicators that led to this revolution. The government of Ahmed Nazif in 2004 led a kind of privatization that privatized many companies and factories and

¹⁶²⁴ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011. Also see: Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁶²⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011. This echoed Rosa Luxemburg's comforting analysis that defeat prepared the way to victory, as revolution: "... cannot come in any other way than through the school of a series of preparatory partial insurrections, which therefore meantime end in partial outward "defeats" and, considered individually, may appear to be "premature"." (Luxemburg 1970: 181)

*led off many workers. This helped a lot during the last six years to ignite the revolution.*¹⁶²⁶

Workers resisted the neoliberal accumulation strategy that constituted the economic dimension of Mubarak's passive revolution. Through their spontaneous strike activity-systems they spread a practical critique of Egypt's political economy and a "good sense" of overcoming this predicament through solidarity.¹⁶²⁷ With regard to the gradual and implicit "preparatory phase" of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Trotsky detected a similar process:

*At the same time that the official society, all that many-storied superstructure of ruling classes, layers, groups, parties and cliques, lived from day to day by inertia and automatism, nourishing themselves with the relics of worn-out ideas, deaf to the inexorable demands of evolution, flattering themselves with phantoms and foreseeing nothing – at the same time, in the working masses there was taking place an independent and deep process of growth, not only hatred for the rulers, but a critical understanding of their impotence, an accumulation of experience and creative consciousness which the revolutionary insurrection and its victory only completed.*¹⁶²⁸

At the eve of the 25 January Revolution, the Egyptian workers' movement was trying to overcome its fragmentation and prepare for a new wave of protests. Following the example of the RETAU, other grassroots workplace committees planned to establish independent trade unions. Teacher leader Abd al-Hafiz recalled that: "...before the revolution we took a decision that we were going to have a trade union. We were planning to have a general strike in education by the end of this year and then announce the trade union. The strikes started with the revolution."¹⁶²⁹ Suez labor leader Saud Omar explained how the revolutionary explosion in his home town was directly linked to the precarious economic situation of its working class. Since the devastations of the 1973 October War the State had channeled little investment to the Canal Zone city. "Suez has the highest number of unemployed youth. It is number five with regard to crime. It is number two with regard to

¹⁶²⁶ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁶²⁷ *For the past few years, workers had launched thousands of strikes protesting the effects of what was a fierce application of neoliberal economic policy... These workers laid necessary groundwork for the uprising by creating (anew) bonds of solidarity as well as by raising awareness of the widespread nature of the deplorable working and living conditions of average Egyptians.*" (Winegar 2011)

¹⁶²⁸ Trotsky 2001: 170-171.

¹⁶²⁹ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

divorces."¹⁶³⁰ The neoliberal passive revolution even worsened the economic predicament of the Suez population. The expansion of temporary contracts, the increased pollution of the petrochemical industries, and the hiring of (extremely) low-paid foreign workers, in particular, put pressure on the wages, the well-being, and the livelihoods of the city's population. *"The biggest problem in Suez was the unemployed youth and the desire to work in the government buildings and factories... and suddenly you are talking about bringing in foreign workers?"*¹⁶³¹ The rejection of the workers' grievances by the city governor and the Ministry of Manpower, angered the Suez citizens, who rose up in protest during the November 2010 parliamentary elections. Omar saw these violent street clashes as a general repetition for the city's vanguard role during the 25 January insurrection: *"This protest in the elections showed the anger of the citizens in Suez. It was like an experiment for the revolution in my opinion."*¹⁶³²

However, throughout 2010, workers' outbursts remained largely fragmented, *ad hoc*, and leaderless. Khaled al-Balshy remembered that:

*At the start of 2010 we were preparing ourselves for a new protest wave, but looking back we now realize the reasons of its failure: we didn't have a leadership... A lot of people were asking where is the connection between the workers' leaders and their demands and the political leadership in order to collect these movements and start a new wave of struggle. But no one could imagine that it would happen like what happened in 25 January...*¹⁶³³

The development of the workers' movement had provided the 25 January Revolution with a strong impetus, but – unlike the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolution, and more in tune with the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, for example – the uprising did not begin as an explicit class protest. Since 2000, the political and economic struggles against the passive revolution of the neoliberal bloc had continuously subsumed each other as moments within a broad process of accumulating popular revolt. If 2005 represented the high point of the civil-democratic "political" moment (and its subsequent collapse), the Mahalla uprising of 2008 expressed the culmination of the "economic" class struggle (and its ensuing re-fragmentation). With the 25 January uprising, the movement's

¹⁶³⁰ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁶³¹ Ibid.

¹⁶³² Ibid.

¹⁶³³ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

moment shifted back to the “political”, but enriched with the class struggles of the previous decade.

Workers as Demonstrators

In the opening chapters of this dissertation I made a crucial methodological distinction between the study of a “person” and of a Subjectivity. A Subjectivity is the participation of an individual body in a social Subject / system of activity / collaborative Project. A person is a microcosm of Subjectivities, a social formation wrapped into an individual body. Being a wage laborer “objectively” does not mean that the individual engaged in wage laborer automatically acquires a proletarian Subjectivity. As I argued, class formation is the immanent result of the active struggle against the predicament of wage labor, and is not the passive reflection of relations and conditions in the workplace. With this in mind, one could plainly see many wage laborers participating in the 25 January uprising, but it took a while before these persons intervened in the revolutionary process *as* workers. Workers first participated as citizens – as a part of the broad, popular revolutionary Project – before they differentiated themselves as class actors: “*In the part played by workers in the movement, demonstrations came before strikes... Strikes came later, four days before Mubarak fell.*”¹⁶³⁴ Hossam al-Hamalawy observed that:

*From day 1 of our uprising, the working class has been taking part in the protests. Who do you think were the protesters in Mahalla, Suez and Kafr el-Dawwar for example? However, the workers were taking part as “demonstrators” and not necessarily as “workers” – meaning, they were not moving independently.*¹⁶³⁵

Fatma Ramadan concurred:

*When the revolution started workers were in the streets as individuals, not as an organized working class. You cannot imagine the three cities Suez, Mahalla and Alexandria, Suez; they had a million demonstrating, Alexandria too, and the workers were the biggest number, but they were not organized as a class.*¹⁶³⁶

Why did workers not immediately participate as class actors in the revolutionary process?

¹⁶³⁴ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁶³⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2011a. Also see Hossam al-Hamalawy in Guardian.co.uk 2011q; Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

¹⁶³⁶ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

*Number one, because this was an uprising and all of them were there in the street; number two, because the government was staging a capital strike, so the workers weren't congregating in factories because the whole time the workers were either in the street or in the popular committees that were protecting the neighborhoods.*¹⁶³⁷

The return of workers to their workplaces stimulated the development of class activity-systems of resistance.

Workers as Class Actors

As soon as the government reopened businesses from 7 February onwards, workers took the revolution to their workplaces and started to strike or demonstrate as class actors.¹⁶³⁸ *“Within the last three days before Mubarak left, there were mass strikes in the whole of Egypt.”*¹⁶³⁹ On Tuesday 8 February, over 6,000 workers of the Suez Canal company in Suez, Port Said, and Ismailia began an open-ended sit-in.¹⁶⁴⁰ Also in Suez some 13,000 steel workers went on strike.¹⁶⁴¹ Cairo public transport and telecom workers Cairo also began to protest.¹⁶⁴² Wednesday 9 February saw the emergence of: *“Strikes everywhere”*¹⁶⁴³. The strike wave encouraged workers from all sections, layers, and regions to engage in work-stoppages, sit-ins, demonstrations, road-blockages, and other protests: thousands of factory workers in Mahalla, and Helwan;¹⁶⁴⁴ 5,000 workers of textile, medicine bottle, and ship repair companies in Suez;¹⁶⁴⁵ court workers in Cairo and Helwan;¹⁶⁴⁶ thousands of workers in the Luxor tourism industry; more than 2,000 workers in Qena; some 5,000 unemployed youth in Aswan;¹⁶⁴⁷ three public transportation garages in Cairo;¹⁶⁴⁸ thousands of workers in front of the Cairo Petroleum Ministry;¹⁶⁴⁹ sanitation workers in Dokki (Cairo);¹⁶⁵⁰ 3,000 Egyptian

¹⁶³⁷ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

¹⁶³⁸ Al-Hamalawy 2011a.; Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b; Sallam 2011c.

¹⁶³⁹ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁶⁴⁰ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁶⁴¹ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁶⁴² Guardian.co.uk 2011p.; McGreal and Shenker 2011.

¹⁶⁴³ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴⁵ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁴⁷ New York Times in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁴⁸ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

National Railways workers;¹⁶⁵¹ railway technicians in Beni Suef;¹⁶⁵² state electricity staff;¹⁶⁵³ service technicians at the Suez Canal company;¹⁶⁵⁴ workers of at least one hospital;¹⁶⁵⁵ employees of a factory of beverages;¹⁶⁵⁶ more than a hundred journalists of *al-Ahram*;¹⁶⁵⁷ the Armed Forces' music corps;¹⁶⁵⁸ et cetera. On Thursday 10 February the bus drivers went on strike, paralyzing transport, and adding to the general disorganization of the State.¹⁶⁵⁹ Reuters observed that: "*If the strikes spread across the country, and paralyse key sectors, it could push Egypt's army to take sides, after trying to maintain an appearance of neutrality.*"¹⁶⁶⁰ Hossam al-Hamalawy claimed that:

*History has shown us that the industrial working class are normally last social class to join a revolt, and yet their intervention is usually the most crucial. We saw that in Iran, and in Tunisia; when the working-class enter the arena with mass strikes, that's when the regime is finished. Today the working-class has officially entered the battle.*¹⁶⁶¹

¹⁶⁵⁰ New York Times in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁵¹ Al-Masry Al-Youm in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁵² Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁵³ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵⁷ Issandr al-Amrani in Guardian.co.uk 2011q; New York Times in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁶⁵⁸ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

¹⁶⁵⁹ Al-Masry al-Youm in Guardian.co.uk 2011q. And: *Also the transport drivers entered into the strikes had a huge impact on Cairo. There were no buses at all. All transportation stopped. The whole of the Cairo population depended on this transport. So there was no movement, a paralysis of the economy, the society.* (Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011).

¹⁶⁶⁰ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011r.

¹⁶⁶¹ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Guardian.co.uk 2011q. And: *But what pushed matters in our favor and pushed Hosni Mubarak to realize OK, that he had to leave power, were the beginning of labor strikes on the Wednesday and Thursday prior to the Friday he stepped down, when 'Umar Sulayman announced that Hosni Mubarak had stepped down. The entry of the working class as an independent social force with its independent general strikes, that's what ended the regime of Hosni Mubarak... The entry of the workers onto the battlefield was really an addition, but in my opinion, it was a decisive addition. The whole time we were in Tahrir we could exert control over Tahrir, but we didn't control the rest of the country. Hosni Mubarak and his entourage were perhaps really complete and steadfast and they still held the battle-axe... But the workers, if they strike, it's "game over." The game is over. It's finished, because the machine won't work. There's no money coming in. No trains are moving. No buses are moving. No factories are working. No ships are moving. No ports are operating. It's "game over"—finished.* (Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b).

Indeed, as Fatma Ramadan emphasized, the impact of the strikes on the unfolding of the uprising could hardly be overestimated: *“This is one of the important reasons for Mubarak to resign and it was the introduction for a general strike in Egypt.”*¹⁶⁶² Gihan Shabeen was of the same opinion: *“But during the last three days there were major strikes in major factories, even military factories. And I think that it was a major force in ousting Mubarak.”*¹⁶⁶³ Wael Tawfiq posited that:

*The movement of the workers was more effective in bringing down the regime than Tahrir was. The support of the workers was clear, for example in Helwan the workers had a sign saying that the workers supported the revolution. This support was the main reason for the success of the revolution.*¹⁶⁶⁴

Gihan Ibrahim stressed that:

*It was only on February 9 when all the workers went on strike, calling for a general strike, that toppled Mubarak. Really. Because it started to hurt the elites pockets and it created enough pressure for Mubarak to leave. It wasn't Wael Ghoneim, you know. [laughs] Sorry. Yes he brought solidarity for more people to come to Tahrir, but that didn't make Mubarak to step down. Yes, it was part of the pressure. But it was only two days after the call [for general strike] that Mubarak left.*¹⁶⁶⁵

Political analyst Sabry Zaky agreed:

*The army itself is a big business tycoon in Egypt. It is not only an army, I call it the first businessman in Egypt. They have many companies, many factories and seashore resorts, they work with billions of dollars. They are very interested in keeping the workers outside these gains. So when the workers started to strike, they were afraid that it would become a very fierce revolution. That's why I think it was important.*¹⁶⁶⁶

Hisham Fouad added that *“...the movement of the workers...”* presented *“...a danger to the capitalist system.”*¹⁶⁶⁷ Even liberal youth activists such as Ahmed al-Gourd acknowledged the crucial part that workers played in bringing Mubarak down: *“...workers... made a huge contribution to the revolution. They started with strikes on 8*

¹⁶⁶² Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶³ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶⁴ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶⁵ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶⁶ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶⁷ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

February all the way to 11 February. Strikes in basically every sector I can think of: energy, steel, textile, everywhere.”¹⁶⁶⁸ Muhammad Abbas, a Muslim Brother youth leader also recognized the importance of workers’ actions: “The threat to strike or the strikes themselves made Mubarak resign faster in Egypt. It was the last step that we had to make.”¹⁶⁶⁹

However, Saud Omar, far from diminishing the role of the strikes, drew attention to the **convergence** of two processes that led to Mubarak’s fall: on the one hand, the powerful entrance of the workers as class actors in the revolution; and on the other, the tendency of the revolutionary masses in Tahrir to move from mere “occupation” to the “assault” of State institutions: “The people marching on Europa palace in Cairo and calling labor strikes in Suez had an equal impact on the outcome of the revolution. These two were revolutionary actions that put pressure on the president to resign.”¹⁶⁷⁰

It is exactly the specter of the increasing interpenetration of the political and economic moments of the revolution that frightened the SCAF and led them to dispose of Mubarak as the leader of the neoliberal bloc. Rather than representing the pinnacle of the uprising, the mass strikes initiated a new, protracted phase of the 25 January Revolution: “From the beginning of the revolution the slogan was: Change, Liberty, and Social Justice. From the beginning. So we cannot stop right now.”¹⁶⁷¹

The Mass Strike

It has been argued by Anne Alexander,¹⁶⁷² by Sameh Naguib,¹⁶⁷³ by Michael Schwartz,¹⁶⁷⁴ and by myself,¹⁶⁷⁵ that the “movement” of the Egyptian worker Subject in the revolutionary process could be understood through Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of the “Mass Strike”.¹⁶⁷⁶ As I have already explained the notion of the Mass Strike in *Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis*, here I only

¹⁶⁶⁸ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

¹⁶⁶⁹ Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁶⁷¹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁶⁷² Alexander 2011b.

¹⁶⁷³ Naguib 2011.

¹⁶⁷⁴ Schwartz 2011.

¹⁶⁷⁵ Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2012.

¹⁶⁷⁶ See Chapter 4 Proletarian Sociogenesis.

summarize its broad outlines. Processing the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1905, Luxemburg approached the numerous strikes that happened throughout the revolutionary process not as a loose collection of protests, but as a *Gestalt*: the Mass Strike, or: “...the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.”¹⁶⁷⁷ During the preceding decade, the Mass Strike was anticipated by local, partial “economic” struggles. At this point in its trajectory, the Strike was still fragmented and depoliticized. The prolepsis of popular revolution, however, radically transformed the quantity and quality of the Strike: “Only in the sultry air of the period of revolution can any partial little conflict between labor and capital grow into a general explosion.”¹⁶⁷⁸ The revolution offered strikes a shared system of activity in which they became contemporaneous. The participation of workers as “strikers” – i.e. class actors – in the revolution stimulated an interpenetration of political and economic demands and forms of organization.

With regard to Egypt, the Strike developed in a similar manner. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s workers were waging “partial little conflicts” against their local and particular forms of exploitation and domination. From 2006 onwards, the vanguard of the workers’ movement took on a trade unionist shape, but the working class at large remained “stuck” within its economic-corporate predicament. The 25 January Revolution “...for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock”,¹⁶⁷⁹ forcefully interpellating all layers and sections of the Egyptian workforce *as workers*. From 8 February on, Egyptian workers began to protest on a massive scale. Their demands were largely “economic”, such as wage increases, but “...in the present crisis there is little doubt they are timed to support the pro-democracy movement.”¹⁶⁸⁰

For workers, the most efficient way they could support the revolutionary Project was by striking: “...once the uprising had begun, any strike acquired a political force and gave momentum to the revolt.”¹⁶⁸¹ Even though most strikes had initially a

¹⁶⁷⁷ Luxemburg 1970: 182.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Ibid. 186.

¹⁶⁷⁹ Ibid. 171.

¹⁶⁸⁰ McGreal and Shenker 2011.

¹⁶⁸¹ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011. Also see “Although it is dressed up as about pay, it is also being interpreted as a demonstration of support from outside the capital for the protests against Mubarak.” (Guardian.co.uk 2011q)

“particularist” character,¹⁶⁸² because of their participation within the broad revolutionary Project, they increasingly came to share social and political demands. Saud Omar explained that:

*The workers had to get out to get their social demands, which were not directly related to the revolution, but so important to them. These demands were a change in the social demands of the worker struggle. New changes because they called for democracy and independent trade-union committees.*¹⁶⁸³

Fatma Ramadan added that:

*The workers had one main demand in the revolution: to fire their corrupt and bad company management. The demands did not come from the revolution, but already developed before, since 2000. The main social demands were the minimum wage, employment of temporary workers, return privatized companies back to the state and to reinstate workers who were fired because of their strikes, and equal pay for workers, e.g. in the petroleum industry. Every group in the working class has its own demands, but these were shared. Every group added his secondary demands.*¹⁶⁸⁴

Hossam al-Hamalawy concluded that:

*The strikes waged by the workers this week were both economic and political fused together. In some of the locations the workers did not list the regime’s fall among their demands, but they used the same slogans as those protesting in Tahrir and in many cases, at least those I managed to learn about and I’m sure there are others, the workers put forward a list of political demands in solidarity with the revolution.*¹⁶⁸⁵

As Kamal Abbas explained, there was a strong “good sense” in the sudden strike surge: “Workers were motivated to strike when they heard about how many billions the Mubarak family was worth... They said: ‘How much longer should we be silent?’”¹⁶⁸⁶ In an undeveloped and spontaneous way, workers began to connect their own particular exploitation with the general framework of *al-nizam*.

¹⁶⁸² Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁶⁸³ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁶⁸⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2011a.

¹⁶⁸⁶ Kamal Abbas, Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

Conversely, the participation of workers as a collective agent in the revolutionary Project brought about an immanent economic dimension to the movement's goal:

*...the alliance of different social and political groups mobilised for change did not make a breakthrough until the revolution crossed from the political to the social domain, going from the streets into the workplaces and rousing workers to take collective action, fusing their own demands with the wider goals of the movement.*¹⁶⁸⁷

Teacher leader Abd al-Hafiz, for example, explained how students' and teachers' became entwined: *"When teachers defend their rights to better working conditions they are indirectly giving their students the best pedagogical lesson. Secondary school students went to Tahrir square... And they were marching: 'left-right: we are going to reform education'."*¹⁶⁸⁸ Within this collaborative Project a dialectical pedagogy between teachers and students emerged, in which the role of educator and educated continuously shifted.

The interpenetration of the political and economic struggle elevated the working class from its economic-corporate moment and hailed the workers as a social and political force.¹⁶⁸⁹ As Luxemburg explained: *"The economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle. Cause and effect here continually change places... their unity is precisely the mass strike."*¹⁶⁹⁰ Whereas the political mobilization of the masses quickly ran out of breath after the fall of Mubarak, the strike movement expanded and intensified until early March: *"Those workers and others have understood from very early on that they cannot assume that their basic requirements will be met by the revolutionary process. The SCAF implored them to stop striking and protesting and return to work to restore economic growth. Nonetheless, strikes have persisted almost daily."*¹⁶⁹¹ With regard to the 1905 Russian Revolution, Luxemburg explained that:

The economic struggle was not here really a decay, a dissipation of action, but merely change of front, a sudden and natural alteration of the first general

¹⁶⁸⁷ Alexander 2011a.

¹⁶⁸⁸ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

¹⁶⁸⁹ However, this was far from a homogeneous and linear process. (Mackell 2012a: 19)

¹⁶⁹⁰ Luxemburg 1970: 185.

¹⁶⁹¹ Beinín 2011b.

*engagement with absolutism, in a general reckoning with capital, which in keeping with its character, assumed the form of individual, scattered wage struggles. Political class action was not broken in January by the decay of the general strike into economic strikes, rather the reverse; after the possible content of political action in the given situation and at the given stage of the revolution was exhausted, it broke, or rather changed, into economic action.*¹⁶⁹²

In Egypt, workers particularized the general revolutionary attack on the Pharaoh, and turned against their own “little Mubaraks” in the companies and factories.¹⁶⁹³ For example, on 16 February 20,000 Mahalla workers went on strike. They closed the factory gates and demanded the dismissal of the factory manager, and the application of a national minimum wage that was in accordance with inflation. The Armed Forces negotiated directly with the strikers and agreed to replace the manager and to increase their wages.¹⁶⁹⁴

From March until August the total number of protests decreased to an average of 65,000 strikers per month.¹⁶⁹⁵ In September a new strike wave shook Egypt, with at least half a million workers protesting. This represented both a quantitative and qualitative development of the Strike. Even though there were fewer “instances” of class struggle, “...the increased numbers participating points to the consolidation of the strike wave into fewer, coordinated disputes.”¹⁶⁹⁶ This reflected the gradual overcoming of the worker Subject’s fragmented condition. From a situation of mere contemporaneity and solidarity, worker activity-systems moved towards collaboration, as Alexander observed:

*...the process can be seen as an organic one, with strike organisation running up against the limits imposed by the individual workplace, logically pushing workers towards coordination between workplaces and therefore developing forms of organisation which express the energy and anger from the base upwards and hold elected officials accountable.*¹⁶⁹⁷

Generalist demands focused on *tathir*: the revolutionary removal of *feloul*, remnants of *al-nizam*: “...pushing out regime cronies and reclaiming institutions like the professional syndicates and university departments that have long been

¹⁶⁹² Luxemburg 1970: 172.

¹⁶⁹³ Alexander 2012.

¹⁶⁹⁴ Bocchialini and al-Gawzy 2012.

¹⁶⁹⁵ Alexander 2012.

¹⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Ibid.

commandeered by the state."¹⁶⁹⁸ Tathir was the undeveloped form of the workers' critique of Egypt's neoliberal bloc. In addition, workers demanded the renationalization of privatized companies, an abolition of temporary contracts, and a fair national minimum wage; aims that directly challenged the neoliberal strategy of accumulation.¹⁶⁹⁹

Proletarian Neoformations

Before the 25 January Revolution, the development of the Strike had already spawned four independent trade unions, established by the real estate tax workers; the pensioners; the health technicians; and the teachers. Ahmed al-Sayyid of the health technician union proudly asserted that:

*These four trade unions were already made before the revolution: they didn't use the revolution as a springboard to become independent trade unions. We announced the trade union by the end of 2009. Those four trade unions were working as a seed of the revolution, under pressure of the regime and the police.*¹⁷⁰⁰

Other movements, such as the Voice of the Nurses, also moved towards establishing their own, independent unions. However, at the eve of the 25 January Revolution, the Egyptian working class as a whole was still struggling to overcome its economic-corporate predicament. Its trade unionist neoformations *"...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."*¹⁷⁰¹

Independent trade unions, autonomous strike committees, and individual worker leaders and leftist activists played a role in organizing some political strikes in solidarity with the insurrection, but they could not direct the spontaneous development of the Strike as a Mass Strike. At this point in the trajectory of the Mass Strike there was no coordination, but only a contemporaneity of the worker protests, which, nevertheless, stimulated solidarity between particular activity-systems and the horizontal transference of

¹⁶⁹⁸ Abd al-Fattah in Shenker 2011e.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Al-Hamalawy 2011b.

¹⁷⁰⁰ Interview with Ahmed al-Sayyid, Cairo, 23 March 2011.

¹⁷⁰¹ Alexander 2012. Emphasis in original. Also see Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

demands and methods. The trade unionist vanguard was but a drop in the ocean of thousands of spontaneously striking workers.

However, the revolution also presented an opportunity for the vanguard of the workers' movement to consolidate and expand the leading trade unionist neoformation. In Tahrir Square representatives of the four independent unions decided to constitute the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) as a potential center for the workers' movement.¹⁷⁰² They formulated a class program that was based on demands that had emerged spontaneously from the Strike since 2006, including: a national minimum and maximum wage; the right to establish independent trade unions and the abolition of the GFETU; the right to strike and protest; the renationalization of privatized companies; the cleansing of the public sector of corrupt managers; improved healthcare; and the abolition of temporary contracts.¹⁷⁰³ The disciplined and politicized presence of EFITU militants in the Square – one of the discrete activity-systems within the broad collaborative Project of Tahrir – directly instructed workers and their leaders from other sectors and governorates to form their own independent unions when they returned to their homes and workplaces.¹⁷⁰⁴

After the fall of Mubarak, the revolutionary collaborative Project fell apart; or rather, its various participating activity-systems differentiated and crystallized themselves as they struggled to develop a critique of *al-nizam* and a self-concept. Workers returning to their workplaces particularized and transposed their revolutionary experience to their predicament as wage laborers. Feeling empowered by the Mass Strike, they began to set up their own trade unionist neoformations vis-à-vis the factory management and the structures of the GFETU: *"A lot of people are now coming to us to ask for advice to make their own independent unions and to join our independent union. We haven't enough time to answer all applications for new unions and jobs... The only future for unions in Egypt is the independent union."*¹⁷⁰⁵

In order to defend their rights, workers had to overcome the obstacle of the State trade unions. The development of the Strike thus followed a dual path of

¹⁷⁰² Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011.

¹⁷⁰³ Alexander 2012; Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁷⁰⁴ Alexander 2012.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011.

resistance against both capitalist exploitation and State domination. The “political” demand for the right to establish independent and democratic trade unions was immediately interwoven with their direct, “economic” struggle.¹⁷⁰⁶ Some of the popular committees that spontaneously emerged from the revolutionary process – e.g. in Port Said – developed trade unionist practices and demands, engaging with the social dimension of the uprising.¹⁷⁰⁷ Gihan Ibrahim observed that:

*The regime still exists: those institutions have been corrupted to the core for decades. We can't assume that after a couple of weeks, after the revolution, that they will be gone or cleansed. Even Husayn Megawer is still the head of the federation of workers. The head is still in place. There is no possible way that we can be democratic within the state corrupted system of unions.*¹⁷⁰⁸

The entanglement of economic and political emancipation meant that the workers’ struggle shifted from a struggle against the “little Mubaraks” in their local and particular workplace and community, to the regional and national institutions of the State.¹⁷⁰⁹ The September 2011 strike wave represented a growing generalization of the workers’ coordination and consciousness. Firstly, in contradistinction to the “spontaneous”¹⁷¹⁰ worker protests in the period from February until March 2011, these strikes were planned and organized by the independent unions that had emerged since February. Conversely, the September strikes instructed other workers to coordinate their protests and form trade unionist organizations themselves.¹⁷¹¹ Trade unionism also reached out to layers of the working class that hitherto had remained relatively passive:

...social layers which have little tradition of identification with the workers’ movement adds to the richness of the picture. 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

¹⁷⁰⁶ Al-Hamalawy 2011a; 2011b.

¹⁷⁰⁷ Interview with Abd al-Hafiz, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁷⁰⁹ Alexander 2012.

¹⁷¹⁰ As I explained in *Chapter 22 A Revolutionary Project*, the adjective “spontaneous” does not exclude organization. Every protest is organized in some way by the organic leaders of the activity-system. It emphasizes, however, the *ad hoc*, unplanned, decentralized, and uncoordinated character of the activity.

¹⁷¹¹ Alexander 2012.

*tourists on Nile river trips are among those who have been drawn into the orbit of the workers' movement, adopting forms of collective action and organisation shaped by the strike wave.*¹⁷¹²

By 2012, the EFITU had become the largest national independent trade union federation, coordinating the activities of some 200 unions, which gathered around two million workers.¹⁷¹³ Whereas the workplace "strike committee" was the leading neoformation of the workers' movement between 2006-2010, from 2011 onwards, trade unionist forms increasingly overcame the local and sectoral fragmentation of the proletarian Subject: *"Although new and fragile, the independent unions are no longer simply growing out of strike action; they are leading strikes and developing mechanisms of inter-union and inter-workplace coordination..."*¹⁷¹⁴ A qualitative step was taken to overcome the workers' economic-corporate predicament, but, even by 2012, Hossam al-Hamalawy observed that:

*[there is still no] machine or a structure that can mobilize the working class, articulate their demands, and claim there [sic] representation... The industrial upturn, which has witnessed millions of Egyptian workers going on strikes or staging protests since 2006, is still lacking a national leadership that can coordinate the strikes, claim class representations, and raise political demands on behalf of the workers in the current political arena.*¹⁷¹⁵

Expansion of the Worker ZPD

Before the 25 January Revolution, worker leaders and leftist activists were discussing the boundaries of the Zone of Proximal Development of the workers'

¹⁷¹² Alexander 2012. This echoed Luxemburg's vivid description of the Mass Strike: *"This is a gigantic, many-colored picture of a general arrangement of labor and capital which reflects all the complexity of social organization and of the political consciousness of every section and of every district; and the whole long scale runs from the regular trade-union struggle of a picked and tested troop of the proletariat drawn from large-scale industry, to the formless protest of a handful of rural proletarians, and to the first slight stirrings of an agitated military garrison, from the well-educated and elegant revolt in cuffs and white collars in the counting house of a bank to the shy-bold murmurings of a clumsy meeting of dissatisfied policemen in a smoke-grimed dark and dirty guardroom."* (Luxemburg 1970: 171)

¹⁷¹³ Al-Hamalawy 2012; Mackell 2012b: 30. Some of the State unions tried to break the independent trade-union movement by *"... supporting the workers and attacking the government and defending the minimum wage. They were waging fake struggles for workers' rights. They are trying to create chaos in every case. This is their last chance,"* RETAU leader Kamal Abu al-Eita explained. (Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011)

¹⁷¹⁴ Alexander 2012.

¹⁷¹⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2012.

movement. Mubarak's neoliberal passive revolution determined the Egyptian workers' general Social Situation of Development. In order to overcome their economic-corporate predicament, workers had to move against hostile State institutions such as the GFETU and the Interior Ministry, public sector managers, and/or State-supported private capitalists. Due to the repressive and unaccommodating character of the Mubarak dictatorship from the 1990s onwards, the workers' economic struggle almost automatically – yet often not explicitly – acquired a political dimension. Within the boundaries of political dictatorship, for many worker leaders and leftist activists, independent trade unionism was impossible.

The 25 January Revolution forcefully solved the question. Workers were (partially and incompletely) emancipated from dictatorship by mediation of the popular collaborative Project, and, in turn, assisted in the (partial and incomplete) political emancipation of *al-sha'b*. The revolution was a “...*living political school*...”¹⁷¹⁶ that instructed the workers and developed their activity-systems. The rise of the Mass Strike, the disorganization of the State and the subsequent political hegemonic struggle, heightened the “upper limit” of the workers' ZPD: “*The Egyptian revolution was for us a safe place, a safe haven against the repression of the Mubarak regime and the state syndicate.*”¹⁷¹⁷ Trade unionism was no longer a future moment in the trajectory of the worker Subject, it became the actual line of development. The new Minister of Manpower, Ahmed al-Borai, even granted independent unions a framework to conduct their activities legally.¹⁷¹⁸

“*Yet at the same time the new government has drafted a law criminalizing strikes, protests, demonstrations and sit-ins that interrupt private or state-owned businesses or affect the economy, as long as the emergency laws remain in force,*”¹⁷¹⁹ Hazem Kandil noted. The military “transition regime” dealt with the workers' movement by a combination of repression and concession. Hisham Fouad explained that:

¹⁷¹⁶ Luxemburg 1970: 172

¹⁷¹⁷ Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011.

¹⁷¹⁸ Interview with Ahmed al-Sayyid, Cairo, 23 March 2011; Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; Interview with Kamal Abu al-Eita, Giza, 20 March 2011. Although many contentious issues remained unsolved, for example the right of the GFETU to cut the union's membership fee from the workers' wages.

¹⁷¹⁹ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

*The Minister for Manpower said that he will recognize any independent trade-union. So there is no longer any obstacle for the workers, and also for the peasants. This is a great victory for the workers. The Prime Minister spoke about the minimum wage and he will raise it to about 900 for the highly educated workers and 600 for minimal educated workers and 500 for the non-educated. It is not enough but it will give the workers the courage to push for other reforms and they will be successful in this, I think. But on the other hand, they attacked workers who organized strikes and sit-ins and they say that this is the main danger in Egypt now: the protest of workers. This expresses their fear that the democratic revolution transforms into a social revolution. They try to stop the revolution of the workers in various ways, including the use of military force and the detainment of workers to stop these protests.*¹⁷²⁰

Rather than appeasing the workers, the few concessions that the SCAF granted rather encouraged them to continue and expand their protests.¹⁷²¹

During the Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917, the workers had almost entirely “skipped” the trade unionist moment, moving immediately from an economic-corporate condition to organs of self-governance: the soviets. Within the 25 January Revolution Egyptian workers had not produced such novel neoformations, but they objectified themselves as a social Subject through mediation of the seeds of trade unionism that already existed from the previous decade. For leftists seeking to assist the proletarian Subject in its development, the primary question became the capacity of the working class to become a political and hegemonic force: “...it started all over the place without our coordination... Now it is our role to connect it all and facilitate it...”¹⁷²² Alexander asserted that:

*...two conditions for this happening have already been met: the workers’ movement has begun to gain enough mastery over its constituent parts to be able to use its social power in battle with the state, while the demands that are now being raised by this movement cannot be satisfied within the limits of neoliberal capitalism in the context of intensifying economic crisis at a local and global level.*¹⁷²³

¹⁷²⁰ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁷²¹ Ibid.

¹⁷²² Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁷²³ Alexander 2012.

Although politicized worker leaders and leftist activists noticed the presence of a spontaneous good sense that moved towards political consciousness,¹⁷²⁴ most trade unions and strike committees refrained from elaborating an explicit political program. Hossam al-Hamalawy noted that:

*As long as the most militant sections of the current strike—those who are leading the mass strikes in sectors in direct confrontation with the military—are not organized into a political party, you can expect the workers’ voice to continue to be absent in the current political process.*¹⁷²⁵

Unsurprisingly, most labor leaders had a pragmatic “first things first” attitude: “[a workers’ party] ...will be positive in the future, but right now we should focus on developing the trade-unions and the federation and we use up a lot of energy in organizing this.”¹⁷²⁶

Even though it was the negation of the workers’ economic-corporate condition, trade unionism already showed signs of becoming a future obstacle for the further development of the worker Subject. The more or less stable neoformations of the working class – the “practico-inert” objectifications of proletarian praxis, in Sartre’s language¹⁷²⁷ – had to be continuously brought into an organic relation with the workers themselves, lest organizational “bureaucratism” and ideological “economism” colonized or commodified the worker Subject.¹⁷²⁸ Eventually, trade unions would develop from instruments to obstacles for proletarian emancipation, as they only expressed a partial emancipation of the working class within the boundaries of the capitalist mode of production and its integral State.

¹⁷²⁴ “If you talk to a lot of workers, they are very politicized, even if they don’t know it, they are very politicized, they are not only for a higher wage, they are asking for the head of this corrupted institution, or syndicate or factory to be removed. This is a very political demand because who has put this guy in charge? Mubarak or his cronies and so on.” (Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011)

¹⁷²⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2012.

¹⁷²⁶ Interview with Kamal Abbas, Cairo, 27 March 2011.

¹⁷²⁷ Sartre 2000.

¹⁷²⁸ Sartre equates objectification with alienation, and has a negative view on the process of institutionalization of a social movement (the “fused group”). However, rather than excluding each other, movement mobilization and organizational institutionalization are logically entwined (Beinin and Vairel 2011: 9), and presuppose each other. Bureaucratism is not a consequence of institutionalization, but the result of the lack of a democratic, organic and reciprocal relation between the “masses” and their “intellectuals”; i.e. the lack of a dialectical pedagogy. A strike meeting, committee, facebook discussion, et cetera, are already objectified and mediating forms of institutionalization of the “movement”.

Another, more immediate problem was a general drop in the militancy of the workers' movement by February 2012. The cosmetically reformed GFETU continued to challenge the authority and prestige of the fledgling independent trade unions, presenting itself as a more capable, effective, and powerful instrument of collective bargaining.¹⁷²⁹ Likewise, many workers continued to struggle through these distorted – but traditional and established – mass organizations.

Popular or Proletarian Revolution?

As a process, the 25 January Revolution was – and at the moment of writing still is – the interpenetration of the civil-democratic and class struggles since the 1990s. The uprising of 25 January brought a collection of social Subjects together in a collaborative Project which pitted them as the abstract category of *al-sha'b* against the concrete Pharaoh who embodied the similarly abstract concept of *al-nizam*.¹⁷³⁰ Because of the late entrance of the workers *as* workers in the insurrection, the broad counter-bloc of social forces, and the nature of the demands, the character of this phase was clearly popular and democratic. Casting the 25 January Revolution in Lenin's appraisal of the Paris Commune:

*...it was undoubtedly a "real people's" revolution, since the mass of the people, their majority, the very lowest social groups, crushed by oppression and exploitation, rose independently and stamped on the entire course of the revolution the imprint of their own demands, their attempt to build in their own way a new society in place of the old society that was being destroyed.*¹⁷³¹

Trotsky stressed that every revolution constitutes a Project of subaltern nation-building: *"It is understood that every great revolution is a people's or a national revolution, in the sense that it unites around the revolutionary class all the virile and creative forces of the nation and reconstructs the nation around a new core."*¹⁷³²

The fall of the Mubarak spelled the end of the collaborative Project as there was no concrete and shared concept of *al-nizam* beyond the figure of the President. The "people's revolution" dissolved into its constituting activity-systems –

¹⁷²⁹ Mackell 2012: 19.

¹⁷³⁰ See Sallam, Stacher and Toensing 2011.

¹⁷³¹ Lenin 1964: 416.

¹⁷³² Trotsky 1931 [MIA].

although it had thoroughly transformed many of its participants. The form of the popular Project survived its real collaborative activity in the shape of a nationalist meta-narrative. However, bereft of its real content of collaborative activity, this Project was appropriated and colonized by each of the political forces involved in the post-Mubarak hegemonic struggle: *“The revolution was a group work. But now everyone is talking about the revolution as if he owns it.”*¹⁷³³

Gramsci pointed out that a class acquires hegemony when it is able to demonstrate its particular interests as the interests of the whole society. Aiming to present themselves as a directive force in post-Mubarak Egypt, each established class fraction appropriated the nationalist narrative and claimed to be the true defenders of the national good. On 14 February, the SCAF demanded that worker leaders stop their strikes.¹⁷³⁴ Right-wing nationalist, Islamist, military, liberal, and even leftist¹⁷³⁵ forces concurred and rejected workers’ protests as being “parochialist”, counter-revolutionary, and against the national good.¹⁷³⁶ Even independent media outlets such as al-Masry al-Youm shed the continuation of the strike movement in a negative light.¹⁷³⁷ This narrative started to affect the ranks of non-proletarian revolutionary youth:

*Now there is a split within the ranks of the revolutionaries between the youth of the middle classes and their youth organizations, who announced their confidence in the armed forces, their opposition to the continuing rallies in al-Tahrir Square and announced that they were against the strikes, and called it class-based strikes, on the basis that those who are taking part in them were classes with limited interests that primarily concerned them and weren’t of concern to the rest of the classes in society, from their point of view. There was a situation of hostility between the workers and middle class youth.*¹⁷³⁸

Workers were no longer recognized as legitimate, solidary assistants in the popular revolutionary Project. Hisham Fouad asserted that:

¹⁷³³ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁷³⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011x.

¹⁷³⁵ Especially the “civil-democratic” Left. Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁷³⁶ Clément 2011; al-Hamalawy 2011a ; Sallam 2011c; Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; Naguib 2011.

¹⁷³⁷ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011; Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011; Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011; Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁷³⁸ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b.

...the media concentrated on political movements and youth movements and they tried to make an impression that these youth and political movements led the revolution and that their demands are the basic demands of the revolution. These demands speak about the liberal and democratic ideas: they are not social demands from workers and peasants. This is the plan of the State, to separate between these two types of demands and to concentrate on the groups which only focus on political demands.

...when the workers entered, they rapidly raised other demands connected to the mode of production, redistribution of wealth, and so on, and this did not agree with the capitalist classes. So they thought: we have to enter rapidly to stop this movement and concentrate on political demands only and avoid social demands and so on.¹⁷³⁹

Within the post-Mubarak hegemonic struggle, a coalition of economically right-wing forces aimed to exclude the workers from any reconfiguration of the neoliberal historical bloc, and to re-fragment the proletarian Subject into an economic-corporate condition. The differentiation and crystallization of class forces within the hegemonic struggle, reveals the objective end of the popular phase of the 25 January Revolution, although its subjective existence continues in the form of its formal representation by different social Subjects. Saba Mahmood asked if:

[Egyptian elites will] accommodate the demands of the poor, the unemployed, and the workers who have so far been equal partners in their struggle against political corruption and autocracy? Will the protestors in Tahrir Square continue to fight for economic justice even as they gain political and civil rights in the months to come?¹⁷⁴⁰

¹⁷³⁹ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011. See also Walter Ambrust (2011a): “The notion that the economy is in ruins — tourists staying away, investor confidence shattered, employment in the construction sector at a standstill, many industries and businesses operating at far less than full capacity — could well be the single most dangerous rationale for imposing cosmetic reforms that leave the incestuous relation between governance and business intact. Or worse, if the pro-democracy movement lets itself be stampeded by the “economic ruin” narrative, structures could be put in place by “technocrats” under the aegis of the military transitional government that would tie the eventual civilian government into actually quickening the pace of privatization. Ideologues, including those of the neoliberal stripe, are prone to a witchcraft mode of thinking: if the spell does not work, it is not the fault of the magic, but rather the fault of the shaman who performed the spell. In other words, the logic could be that it was not neoliberalism that ruined Mubarak’s Egypt, but the faulty application of neoliberalism”

¹⁷⁴⁰ Mahmood 2011a.

As an answer, Saud Omar stressed that: *“The most important benefit of the revolution is this image: the alliance between the regime and capital.”*¹⁷⁴¹ If the substance of the 25 January Revolution is a war of movement against neoliberalism’s passive revolution, then it cannot only but succeed by destroying the domestic and transnational class alliances and the accumulation strategy of the neoliberal bloc.¹⁷⁴² As such, the proletarian and democratic moments of the revolutionary process are entwined. Among politicized subaltern actors, this notion is expressed by their call for a “continuation” of the revolution, or even a “new” revolution.¹⁷⁴³ For example, Mustafa Bassiouny stressed that:

*At this moment we are still in the process of revolution... After the resignation of Mubarak, the RS realized that this revolution was not finished, the police state was still there, and this opened the door to another revolution. The capitalist class still exists and rules the country through the army. The revolution did not touch upon the power base of the capitalists. Shafiq and other government figures still adhere to the free market. Even small reforms, such as the minimum wage and fair taxes, are not discussed by the government. The popular movement in the streets will not stop until they realized a social change... The people demands social reforms, so the revolution will be permanent. This opens the door for a new wave, a social revolution which may lead to a socialist revolution.*¹⁷⁴⁴

The democratic revolution cannot succeed except by a reconfiguration of the economic structure, and the economic structure cannot be transformed unless political power is captured and appropriated by a subaltern counter-bloc. Alternatively, the current ruling classes may reconfigure the neoliberal bloc to exclude old forces and include new ones, and to reinstate some form of “moral economy”. The consolidation of such a formation would imply the end of the revolutionary process. However, Egypt’s debt cycle and the interests of foreign and transnational capital – which continues to push for neoliberal reforms – severely limit the political and economic space for such a “defensive” passive revolution.¹⁷⁴⁵

¹⁷⁴¹ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

¹⁷⁴² Maher 2011.

¹⁷⁴³ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁷⁴⁴ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁷⁴⁵ Maher 2011.

CHAPTER 25

The Counter-Revolution

The gun doesn't know the way to democracy.

Saud Omar, Suez labor leader

Al-Nizam in the Face of Revolution

Even though the 25 January protesters constructed their goal as the straightforward overthrow of the unequivocal evil that Mubarak's reign represented, in reality they faced a multi-tentacled monster. The Egyptian *nizam* – the neoliberal bloc and its integral State – was vertically and horizontally layered. As the ruling classes, especially in a complex capitalist society, cannot rule directly, they create forms of mediation to dominate and oppress the subaltern classes. These mediations often acquire a logic and agency of their own, and sometimes attain a far-reaching autonomy vis-à-vis their original, constituting classes – as happened during Nasser's reign. Every so often State elites are even able to establish themselves as a ruling class in their own right. This process has been described in previous chapters as “state capitalism in reverse”, whereby, during the 1970s and 1980s, elite bureaucrats, officials, and officers were transformed into a new capitalist class.

At the eve of the 25 January Revolution, the main structures of class rule were the military, the NDP, the Ministry of Interior with the police and the CSF, and the GFETU leadership.¹⁷⁴⁶ I consider parliament, the cabinet, ministries, universities, the office of the Grand Mufti, et cetera, as secondary sources of class rule, because they were more or less directly supervised, infiltrated, and subjugated by the institutions above. A third category is the most contended spaces of class rule: the professional syndicates, the GFETU factory committees, the media, the legal parties, the Church, the Sufi Orders, et cetera. These institutions often acted as sites of State coercion and consent as well as spaces of political and economic resistance.

¹⁷⁴⁶ I have elaborated upon the role of the GFETU and the NDP in previous chapters.

Military State Power

Since the coup of the Free Officers in 1952, the army played a crucial role in Egyptian politics. Through the military Caesarism of the Nasser era, the State was transformed and acquired a formidable autonomy vis-à-vis the old ruling classes, especially landowners and domestic and foreign commercial and financial capital groups. The State first acted as the caretaker and nurturer of a passive industrial bourgeoisie, and during the 1960s it increasingly acted as the primary capitalist force through a massive expansion of the public sector. Being the ruling stratum in the 1950s and 1960s, the military became a “state within a state” – or rather a patchwork of semi-autonomous spaces within the integral State. The Armed Forces consisted of various contending power structures – the Army, Air Defense, Air Force, Navy, Intelligence Services, Republican Guard, Ministry of Defense, et cetera – which were ruled by their generals as small fiefdoms. Nasser himself tried to limit the autonomous power of the military – embodied in such independent figures as Chief-of-Staff Abd al-Hakim Amer – within the ensemble of State structures through the formation of “civil” forces such as the GFETU and the ASU. After the Six Day War in 1967, Nasser began to sidetrack the role and position of the Armed Forces in political society, moving towards a dictatorship of the police rather than the military.¹⁷⁴⁷

Sadat’s passive revolution in the 1970s continued the trend to demilitarize the State. With the rise of the *Infatih* bourgeoisie, the political autonomy, power and influence of the Armed Forces decreased in exchange for economic and military rents from the USA. As Paul Amar explained, their retreat from the political sphere and focus on economic activities reconstructed the generals into a class of “national capitalists”.¹⁷⁴⁸ Sabry Zaky stressed that the USA helped to transform the post-Nasserist Armed Forces into a State structure that it could directly domesticate and contain through military aid.¹⁷⁴⁹ Yet, even though the generals were financially and militarily tied to the USA, their consciousness became that of a national capitalist class, which turned the rentier relation of dependence into a feeling of deep resentment towards their foreign donors.¹⁷⁵⁰ Additionally, since the 1980s, the position and prestige of the military in Egyptian society was

¹⁷⁴⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁴⁹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁷⁵⁰ Amar 2011a; Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

crumbling, while the NDP and the Interior Ministry emerged as the primary sources of State power.¹⁷⁵¹ The Armed Forces were appalled by the shameful brutality and violence of the police forces, which had superseded the military as the main coercive force in Egyptian society.¹⁷⁵² Moreover, in the 1990s and 2000s their economic power was overshadowed by the rise of the neoliberal capitalists surrounding Gamal Mubarak, who were perceived by the generals as “crony capitalists” and greedy plunderers of the nation’s wealth.¹⁷⁵³ Hazem Kandil emphasized that the economic profits of the Armed Forces were modest compared to those of the “civil” State elites:

*...they were given projects that would provide profits which could fund a decent life for officers: a car, a flat, a vacation house, and so on. But this is no economic empire on the scale the Turkish army has built up, for example. It is a much more modest enterprise. Military facilities are quite shabby compared with what is on offer in the wealthy districts of Cairo. Officers have not grossly enriched themselves. What you gain in the army or air force pales in comparison to what you can get as a senior police officer or member of the ruling party. Under Mubarak, the Minister of the Interior stashed over \$1 billion in his bank account. The Minister of Defence could not dream of that kind of money.*¹⁷⁵⁴

This explains why, when the 25 January protests turned into a revolution, the Armed Forces were not inclined to save their “competitors”: the Interior Ministry and the NDP. Some of the generals probably saw the revolution as a means to weaken or even destroy the power bases of these competitors.¹⁷⁵⁵ In the end, the generals were not against “neoliberal” reform in itself, but against the fact that they weren’t the main beneficiaries of the process of “state capitalism in reverse”. Walter Ambrust claimed that:

The generals may well prefer a new round of neoliberal witchcraft. More privatization will simply free up assets and rents that only the politically connected (including the generals) can acquire. Fixing a failed neoliberal state by

¹⁷⁵¹ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁵² Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵⁴ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁵⁵ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

*more stringent applications of neoliberalism could be the surest way for them to preserve their privileges.*¹⁷⁵⁶

Civil State Power

Under Mubarak's rule, the power of the Interior Ministry expanded. At the eve of the 25 January Revolution, the Interior Ministry controlled all aspects of law enforcement, criminal investigations and repression through its various departments: State Security Investigations Service (SSI), Public Security, Municipal Police, Special Police, General Security and Central Security Forces (CSF), Traffic Police, Tourism and Antiquities Police, et cetera.

The hated SSI or *Amn al-Dawla*, counting some 3,000 officers,¹⁷⁵⁷ infiltrated, controlled and terrorized political opposition groups and thus constituted the first line of defense of the State, preventing protest movements rather than containing them. When political or social protest did emerge, the CSF was mobilized to quickly and brutally subdue it. After the assassination of Sadat, the number of CSF troops grew to 100,000, consisting mostly of conscripts who failed the standards for military conscription. The CSF uprising of 1986 called the Armed Forces back into the streets, showing that the military pillar of *al-nizam* was not completely eroded. Yet by the 2000s the number of CSF conscripts had increased to 300,000 à 350,000, rivaling the number of military troops, and acting as Mubarak's private army.¹⁷⁵⁸ The *Amn al-Markazi* was equipped with APCs, rubber bullets, water cannons, and tear gas canisters.¹⁷⁵⁹ From the end of the 1980s onwards, the CSF enjoyed the back-up of informal plainclothes police, or *baltageyya*: "...a million and a half... hired thugs or informers without uniform or ranks, often people with a criminal record who had cut deals with the authorities."¹⁷⁶⁰

In contradistinction to the Armed Forces, the CSF and its plainclothes counterpart were an apolitical, disloyal and undisciplined force. Because of its low morale and morality, this blunt instrument was only effective if it could be mobilized in great numbers, surrounding and overrunning any opposition, as happened in the Mahalla uprising of 6 April 2008. Failure to execute this simple

¹⁷⁵⁶ Ambrust 2011.

¹⁷⁵⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁵⁸ Paul Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁵⁹ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁶⁰ Ibid.

tactic would result in demoralization and retreat, as happened in the first Friday of Anger on 28 January 2011.

Apart from the direct and centrally coordinated repression by the SSI and CSF, the terror through which the State governed was also rooted in everyday, decentralized, and local forms of violence. Police forces engaged in independent activities of exploitation, oppression and domination of ordinary civilians:

...police stations gained relative autonomy during the past decades. In certain police stations this autonomy took the form of the adoption of a militant ideology or moral mission; or some Vice Police stations have taken up drug running; or some ran protection rackets that squeezed local small businesses. The political dependability of the police, from a bottom-up perspective, is not high. Police grew to be quite self-interested and entrepreneurial on a station-by-station level.¹⁷⁶¹

Whereas political activists, students and workers were confronted during their protests with the organized coercive power of the State in the shape of the CSF, ordinary, politically inactive Egyptian citizens were terrorized daily by these “little Mubaraks”. For them, Mubarak was the generalization of the particular little Mubarak who controlled their neighborhood and workplace; and *al-nizam* was the generalization of the particular forms of exploitation, oppression, and domination they suffered. In opposition to the conscripts of the CSF, these State-sanctioned mafia groups had much to lose in a confrontation with the people organizing themselves as a social Subject in neighborhood and workplace committees.

Against the Revolution

Classic Tactics

When the 25 January protests began, the State adopted its usual tactics: mass mobilization of police forces. However, the large number of protesters and widespread nature of the revolt rendered a swift repression by a concentrated force impossible. Between 25 and 28 January a protracted guerrilla battle between protesters and CSF ensued. The fight in the streets was complemented by an offensive in cyberspace, as the regime “...did not choose merely to target a handful of

¹⁷⁶¹ Amar 2011a.

*the major social networking sites, but rather the internet as a whole in addition to mobile phone networks...*¹⁷⁶²

The urban guerrilla exhausted the security apparatus and cleared the way for the massive mobilizations of Friday 28 January, when the masses were able to use their numbers to surround, overrun and defeat the CSF. According to Paul Amar, the crucial power shift from the Interior Ministry to the Armed Forces already happened at this juncture: *“President Hosni Mubarak lost his political power on Friday, 28 January. On that night the Egyptian military let Mubarak’s ruling party headquarters burn down and ordered the police brigades attacking protesters to return to their barracks.”*¹⁷⁶³

On Saturday, the Armed Forces physically entered the spaces of revolution with tanks, APCs, and soldiers. In opposition to the police forces, it avoided an open and explicitly violent confrontation with the protesters, seemingly contenting itself with occupying key State sites, separating police and protesters, and almost gently removing occupiers from Tahrir. However, the Ministry of Interior was either a sore loser, or, more likely, did not give up easily. It not only withdrew the CSF, but **all** police units, including those involved in more “innocent” activities such as traffic. The initiative went to the *baltageyya*, including plainclothes police and security officers, NDP members, and released criminal elements and looters.¹⁷⁶⁴

As Sabry Zaky remarked, the failure to defeat the multi-headed, widespread monster of the revolution prompted the security apparatus to decentralize itself.¹⁷⁶⁵ If the regime could not defeat the revolution in the streets, it would demobilize and atomize the protesters by calling them back to their homes and neighborhoods that were under attack.¹⁷⁶⁶ I discussed in *Chapter 22 A Revolutionary Project* how this counter-revolutionary tactic backfired, as people began to organize themselves in the shape of civil committees to protect their families and neighborhoods, bringing the revolution into the space of their home, instead of allowing the revolution to be “domesticated”.

¹⁷⁶² Selim 2011a.

¹⁷⁶³ Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁶⁴ Stacher 2011a.

¹⁷⁶⁵ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁷⁶⁶ Selim 2011a.

Armed Forces vs. Interior Ministry

Also on Saturday, Mubarak appointed a new cabinet, headed by Ahmed Shafiq and a Vice-President, Omar Suleiman. Suleiman had been the regime's favored candidate for the position of vice-president for two years.¹⁷⁶⁷ He headed the General Intelligence Services, which were directly dependent on foreign funding and worked closely with the USA and Israel, and which were distrusted by the general public.¹⁷⁶⁸ With the nomination of Suleiman, Mubarak hoped to gain the support of the USA in his controlled "un-transition"¹⁷⁶⁹ of power. Ahmed Shafiq, for his part, had been a Chief of Staff of the Air Force, which together with the Republican Guard constituted the two elite branches of the Armed Forces and those sections of the military that were closest to Mubarak. The revolution did not only amplify the existing contradictions between the Armed Forces and the Interior Ministry, it also deepened the rifts within the military, between the "national capitalists" and those who profited from neoliberal reforms and foreign rents; and between the small circle of Mubarak protégés and those who had been politically sidelined. Rather than an intentional "good cop / bad cop" strategy, the contradictory attitudes of the army towards the protests expressed a real schism, Paul Amar claimed:

This explains why you can have the contradictory display of the General Chief of the Armed Forces, Muhammad Tantawi, wading in among the protesters to show support on 30 January, while at the same time the chief of the Air Force was named Mubarak's new Prime Minister and sent planes to strafe the same protesters. This also explains why the Presidential Guard protected the Radio/Television Building and fought against protesters on 28 January rather than siding with them.¹⁷⁷⁰

With regard to the hesitant defense of protesters by soldiers during the infamous Battle of the Camel, Paul Amar explained that: "The military were trying as best they could to battle the police/thugs, but Suleiman had taken away their bullets for fear the military would side with the protesters and use the ammunition to overthrow him."¹⁷⁷¹ Ahmed al-Gourad recalled that:

¹⁷⁶⁷ Hajjar 2011.

¹⁷⁶⁸ Amar 2011b; Hajjar 2011.

¹⁷⁶⁹ A formal transition that keeps the existing structures and relations of power intact.

¹⁷⁷⁰ Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁷¹ Amar 2011b.

*At first the army was not on our side. At the very beginning the presidential guard gave ammo to the police. At the beginning. So we burned two APC, two armored cars. We basically surrounded the cars, we got the soldiers out and set the whole thing on fire. After that, suddenly, the army became neutral. It did not actually support it, but it tried to push both us and cops back.... basically they wanted to safeguard a lot of key centers of Cairo and break off the clash between the cops and the protesters.*¹⁷⁷²

In addition to the swings in the revolutionary atmosphere, the contradictory actions of soldiers and officers vis-à-vis the protesters – sometimes protecting them against the police and *baltageyya*, sometimes siding with the Interior Ministry against the demonstrators and occupiers – were determined by their discrete loyalties to particular departments and interest groups within the Armed Forces. Through its course, the revolutionary process also constructed the military as a more or less unitary force with a “center”: the SCAF, which expressed the outcome of an internal power struggle where the Chief of Staff, Muhammad Tantawi, came out on top. In the end even the Republican Guard sided with the SCAF and not the President.¹⁷⁷³

Divide et Impera

In the week following the first Friday of Anger, the State changed tactics. Firstly, through a “capital strike” the government closed the banks and some shops.¹⁷⁷⁴ “People are tired of being cooped up in their apartments, made anxious as their stockpiles of food and money decrease, and they are ready for a sense of “normalcy” to return,”¹⁷⁷⁵ Joshua Stacher noted. This war of attrition against the masses was combined with a selective war of terror against individual participants. By the end of the second week of protests, some 10,000 people had been arrested in Cairo alone.¹⁷⁷⁶ Whereas the military, in general, exercised restraint in confronting the masses, it engaged in the systematic detainment and torture of individual protesters “...for no more than carrying a political flyer, attending the demonstrations or even the way they look.”¹⁷⁷⁷ Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for

¹⁷⁷² Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011.

¹⁷⁷³ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁷⁴ Hossam al-Hamalawy in Haddad 2011b. However, most private stores and supermarkets remained open. (Personal communication with Peter Verkinderen on 1 June 2012)

¹⁷⁷⁵ Stacher 2011a

¹⁷⁷⁶ Guardian.co.uk 2011p.

¹⁷⁷⁷ McGreal 2011.

Personal Rights in Cairo, emphasized that the Armed Forces were, in addition to intimidating ordinary demonstrators, specifically targeting those whom they considered as agitators or instigators of the movement.¹⁷⁷⁸ Either the military had no real understanding of the spontaneous process of revolution and its officers feverishly tried to cut the “hidden hands” behind the protests, or it consciously attempted to behead and weaken the revolutionary hydra, by targeting the organized political and human rights activists – i.e. the organic and traditional intellectuals of the movement. Probably both.

Secondly, the State mobilized its social reserves, especially NDP members, pouring them into the streets as politicized pro-Mubarak supporters. On Monday 31 January the first pro-Mubarak demonstration was staged outside the Information Ministry, rallying some 300 demonstrators. State television focused on these first signs of “division” among the popular masses. Tuesday 1 February saw an increasing number of pro-Mubarak protests. The military for its part, continued to avoid a direct confrontation with the protesters, but closed off roads and train services to sabotage the mobilization of the masses. In the evening Mubarak made his defiant speech, while the army called on the masses to end their protests and return to a situation of normalcy.

This episode served to discredit the main idea of the revolutionary movement, expressed in the slogan of “the people want the fall of the regime”. The mobilization of thousands of plainclothes pro-Mubarak forces saliently challenged the notion that the struggle was between “the people” and “the regime”, but implied that the protesters only represented particularist and partial demands. The President could then present himself as the arbiter of the conflict between different factions within *al-sha’b*, agreeing with some, but not all demands of the protesters in order to promote the “common good” of the nation. As discussed before, this tactic had a big impact on the less politicized layers of the movement. Schielke described the discordant mood among protesters:

The Pro-Mubarak demonstration was clearly organised by the government, with trucks with loudspeakers and pictures of Mubarak riding through the streets and distributing photocopied paper sheets in handwriting saying “Yes to Mubarak, no to destruction.” But it gained genuine popular support and there were really a lot of people spontaneously joining the march for Mubarak. But the people I talked to

¹⁷⁷⁸ Ibid.

*were also positively peaceful, they were out for the return of peace, and it was clear that they had no intention to go to attack the anti-government demonstrators. However, as I walked down Talaat Harb street down to Tahrir, the demonstrators there were much more aggressive and much more organised than the crowd who spontaneously joined the big marches...*¹⁷⁷⁹

Sabry Zaky explained that, if Mubarak had proceeded in this mock-conciliatory fashion he probably would have been able to separate the political vanguard from the popular masses and diffuse the movement.¹⁷⁸⁰ At the very least he would have won precious time to reorganize the counter-revolutionary forces and re-establish the power of the enfeebled Ministry of Interior vis-à-vis the Armed Forces.

However, the increasing clashes between pro-Mubarak supporters and revolutionary protesters, culminating in the Battle of the Camel on Wednesday 2 February, destroyed any wishful thinking about the President's sincerity among the masses: "...the short pro-Mubarak euphoria had again given way to a more critical albeit by no means unified mood."¹⁷⁸¹ After the Battle of the Camel, the regime more or less had to accept the presence of protesters in the streets. The Ministry of Interior had failed to defeat the masses through "formal" police repression and "informal" terror, whereas the Armed Forces were careful not to engage in open conflict with the masses: "...dislodging protesters by force from Cairo's central Tahrir Square, epicentre of the demonstrations, would portray the military in the same light as the widely hated police, risking a popular backlash that could taint its carefully guarded reputation as protector of the people."¹⁷⁸²

Isolation

Even though the generals were reluctant to save the power triad of the NDP, the Interior Ministry and the Gamal Mubarak clique, they needed to secure and reinforce their position in *al-nizam* vis-à-vis the democratic aspirations of the masses. Thus Omar Suleiman and Ahmed Shafiq engaged in a double tactic of cooptation and isolation. They tried, on the one hand, to co-opt the most moderate wing of the movement through negotiations; and, on the other, to isolate the demonstrators from the rest of society. Much to the frustration of Omar Suleiman and Ahmed Shafiq, the first tactic was unsuccessful, as those

¹⁷⁷⁹ Schielke 2011.

¹⁷⁸⁰ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁷⁸¹ Schielke 2011.

¹⁷⁸² Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011k.

groups that participated in the negotiations either swiftly withdrew under pressure from the mass movement, such as al-Baradei and the Muslim Brothers, or did not represent any real force on the ground, such as Amr Moussa and the Council of Wise Men. Suleiman even warned of a coup if the protests and negotiations dragged on, either by the military to enforce a solution, or by some other group.¹⁷⁸³

The second tactic of isolation could have been successful if not for the role of the workers' movement. In previous chapters I discussed the lack of a directing "center" in the revolutionary activity-system, which created a stalemate between protesters occupying Tahrir and soldiers defending key State institutions. The decision of the government to reopen businesses on 7 February was primarily aimed to insulate Egyptian society at large from the pockets of resistance. Yet, the regime's capital strike was replaced with workers' strikes that spread the revolution to workplaces in the whole country. In addition, the continued defiance of Mubarak in the face of the slow disintegration of *al-nizam* prompted the revolutionary masses to start moving towards a confrontation with the military forces occupying key State spaces. The escalating strikes and the inability of the State to deal with the uprising alienated previously loyal factions of the ruling class from the Mubarak regime. As Jack Shenker observed, on 9 February important Egyptian companies were:

*...explicitly distancing themselves from the Mubarak regime... The intimate connections between Egypt's political and business elite are probably the defining feature of Mubarak's three decades in power, and the source of much resentment amongst ordinary Egyptians - if key business figures now see fit to disassociate themselves from a governing clique that served them so well for so long, that can't be a good sign for Omar Suleiman and those around him.*¹⁷⁸⁴

The disorganization of *al-nizam* put pressure on the Armed Forces to find a way out of the regime's crisis. When it became obvious that the masses would not even accept an honorary exit for the President, who already had lost all his real power to the military clique,¹⁷⁸⁵ both Mubarak and the constitutional base of the regime had to be sacrificed on the altar of the counter-revolution. Omar

¹⁷⁸³ Associated Press in Guardian.co.uk 2011p; Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁷⁸⁴ Guardian.co.uk 2011q.

¹⁷⁸⁵ Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

Suleiman's laconic statement that Mubarak had resigned, not only signified the end of his presidency, it also established the SCAF as the sole supra-constitutional ruling power. Formally, Egypt was once more an explicit military dictatorship, although, for the time being, the hands of the generals were somewhat tied to the revolutionary masses who catapulted them into power.

A New Caesarism?¹⁷⁸⁶

On Thursday 10 February, for the first time since the 25 January protests, the military constructed itself as an explicitly autonomous participant in the revolutionary process through its "center" of the "Supreme Council of Armed Forces", an actor issuing "communiqués" on behalf of itself. The SCAF was composed of:

*...the Defence Minister, the Chief of Staff, the heads of the five services, of the five military districts into which the country is divided, and the heads of each of the specialized departments – intelligence, legal and so on. But we can be sure it is the first twelve who call the shots.*¹⁷⁸⁷

The SCAF remained in permanent session in the Ministry of Defense, which symbolically represented the power shift from the Ministry of Interior to the military. The mere fact that the SCAF convened independently from Mubarak was proof of the "silent coup" that was taking place behind the curtains of *al-nizam*. CNN quoted an anonymous senior Egyptian official that: "It's not a coup, it's a consensus."¹⁷⁸⁸ The emerging consensus among Egypt's ruling classes and foreign allies, such as the USA, was that Mubarak's days were numbered and that the military was the only State structure able to contain the revolutionary flood. The more or less stable ensemble of ruling State structures and capitalist classes – the "Mubarak regime" – had collapsed. The balance of power, which began to shift from the Ministry of Interior and the NDP to the Armed Forces after the first Friday of Anger, had now swung decisively in the favor of the military. As they were "national capitalists" the political and economic interests of the generals did

¹⁷⁸⁶ To my surprise an al-Jazeera paper also deployed the concept of Caesarism in order to understand the role of the Armed Forces in the 25 January Revolution. (Hassan 2011)

¹⁷⁸⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁷⁸⁸ In Guardian.co.uk 2011r.

not fully coincide with the “crony capitalists”,¹⁷⁸⁹ but neither did they correspond with those of the revolutionary masses. The civil-democratic demands not only threatened the power base of the Interior Ministry and the NDP, but also the tradition of the “military presidency” and the independent budget and politics of the Ministry of Defense. The turmoil caused by the strikes, which also hit military factories, showed the generals the dangers of an expansion of the revolution in the economic sphere.

Since the late 1970s the Armed Forces had been nurtured by the USA to play the role of “stabilizer” within Egyptian politics.¹⁷⁹⁰ It supplied the USA with a relatively reliable structure that could survive any individual ruler and provide continuity in defending its geopolitical interests in the region. The military, as a State institution, has been, through its entire history, an essentially counter-revolutionary force, in the sense that it never allowed the self-organization and self-determination of *al-sha'b*. Between 1952 and 1967 it had been a transformative or revolutionizing power, but its execution of increasingly radical changes to the Egyptian social formations was meant to **prevent** the development of an autonomous popular Subject, rather than encouraging it.¹⁷⁹¹ Facing the organic crisis of the 1940s, the only way for the Free Officers to fight feudalism and imperialism – and at the same time halt the revolutionary Project that was taking shape – was to become the leader of the revolutionary process, and substitute its own *populist* agency for the *popular* Subjectness of the mass movement.

Ironically, in the 25 January Revolution, the Armed Forces were able to play the part of the Savior-Ruler because of their forced retreat from political society, which inoculated the military from the popular criticisms of the escalated domination, oppression, and exploitation during the last two decades. Simply put, the Armed Forces were, in the eyes of the general audience, no longer a salient pillar of *al-nizam*. On the contrary, in contradistinction to the civil institutions of the Mubarak regime, the Egyptian military had retained an aura of being a national and popular social force. Already on Saturday 29 January, the people called on the army to pick a side in the conflict by the slogan “*the people*”

¹⁷⁸⁹ Even the Intelligence Services headed by Omar Suleiman and relatively loyal to Mubarak and the USA, loathed the “neoliberals” surrounding Gamal Mubarak. See: Amar 2011a.

¹⁷⁹⁰ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁷⁹¹ See *Chapter 8 Nasserism*.

and the army: one hand". A joint statement of youth activists in Tahrir declared that:

*We the people and the youth of Egypt demand that our brothers in the national armed forces clearly define their stance by either lining up with the real legitimacy provided by millions of Egyptians on strike on the streets, or standing in the camp of the regime that has killed our people, terrorized them and stole from them.*¹⁷⁹²

Such slogans and statements could be read as merely naiveté from the part of the protesters. But the military does not constitute a simple Object that lies in wait to be passively recognized for what it "really is" by the revolutionary Subject. The relation between the protesters and the Armed Forces throughout the revolution has been much more complex. The recognition of "our brothers in the national armed forces" as a potential revolutionary ally is an interpellation of the ordinary soldiers as being a part of *al-sha'b* against *al-nizam*. The protesters were anxious when the Armed Forces entered the physical spaces of the revolution, since they recognized the decisive role of the military for the fate of the uprising. In their slogans, but also in their actions of embracing and kissing soldiers, giving them flowers, food and drink, discussing with them, et cetera, the protesters spontaneously tried to draw the "Armed Forces" in their revolutionary activity-system, encouraging them to assist the popular Subject in a solidary way: "*Where is the army? Come and see what the police is doing to us. We want the army. We want the army,*' the protesters in one area of central Cairo shouted, shortly before police fired teargas on them."¹⁷⁹³

The spontaneous instruction of the Armed Forces by protesters was always directed "horizontally: at the soldiers as potential participants in the popular Project, and not at the military as a State structure. Walter Ambrust remarked that: "*Pro-democracy demonstrators and their sympathizers often repeated the slogans "the army and the people are one hand," and "the army is from us." They had the conscripts in mind, and many were unaware of how stark differences were between the interests of the soldiers and the generals.*"¹⁷⁹⁴ For example, when al-Baradei called upon the "Armed Forces" to "save the country now" or it "will explode",¹⁷⁹⁵ it

¹⁷⁹² Guardian.co.uk 2011g.

¹⁷⁹³ Reuters in Guardian.co.uk 2011d.

¹⁷⁹⁴ Ambrust 2011a.

¹⁷⁹⁵ Guardian.co.uk 2011s.

was not clear whether he addressed rank-and-file soldiers to join the side of the revolution as participants of the popular Subject, or the SCAF to take power as a military institution. The first interpellation posited the popular activity-system as the primary and leading Subject of the revolution, whereas the second subjugated the agency of the mass movement to that of the generals. The SCAF profited from this confusion about the nature of the Armed Forces, seen as both a potentially liberating force through its soldiers-developing-towards-solidarity and as one of the pillars of *al-nizam*. Taking the lead in the revolutionary process seemed to agree with the dominant sentiment among protesters that the “Armed Forces” were on their side. Conversely, the generals were pressured to act because of this interpellation of “the people and the army: one hand”, which started to affect the rank-and-file soldiers. Khaled al-Balshy recalled that:

*There were lots of clashes within the army itself, especially among the petty officers and soldiers. The army is a reflection of society. There is also corruption from the military leaders. The petty officers and soldiers will be the referees in the next battle. Even in the army there were two strikes during the revolutionary days. [for example]: the army's music corps. The leadership of the military music corps was fired because of the strike and some soldiers to. It shows that there is also anger in the army...*¹⁷⁹⁶

The generals could not command their troops to open fire on the protesters because that would have broken the spell that conjured the image of the Armed Forces as the defenders of the national popular interest. In order to prevent a spontaneous solidary mode of assistance with the revolutionary Subject from the part of the soldiers, the SCAF had to initiate a colonizing mode of assistance towards the mass movement, which, at face value, satisfied the expectations of both popular masses and soldiers.¹⁷⁹⁷

For the SCAF, a Caesarist intervention was *necessary*, because, just as in 1952, the best way to halt the independent development of the revolutionary process was to lead and thus control it. A Caesarist intervention was *possible*, because, just as in 1952, the Armed Forces were perceived as a national force defending the general good, instead of a State structure with particular interests of its own.¹⁷⁹⁸

¹⁷⁹⁶ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

¹⁷⁹⁷ See Stacher 2011b.

¹⁷⁹⁸ Hassan 2011.

However, the political and economic circumstances of the Caesarist intervention of 2011 differed fundamentally from those of 1952. Firstly, the Free Officers had – or at least quickly developed – a political and economic vision of fighting feudalism and imperialism, establishing some form of social justice, and developing the country. This ethico-political dimension lent their Caesarist intervention a progressive and qualitative character. It was *progressive* because it strengthened the position of subaltern classes and groups – peasants, workers, women, students, et cetera – vis-à-vis foreign and domestic capital groups. It was *qualitative* because it transformed political and economic structures more strongly than the neocolonial elites ever dared, could, or wanted.¹⁷⁹⁹

The SCAF, however, did not arrive at the scene of revolution with noble intentions, but was pushed in its role of revolutionary, and reluctantly played the part of Savior-Ruler only to save its own particular interests. Menal Khaled, ex-member of the RS and a leader of the cinema workers, explained that:

*A lot of people who were not participating in the revolution, who remained at home, are thinking that the army is protecting the revolution, but that is not right, the army was forced to protect the revolution and forced to go the way of the people. Not the other way around. It is unconstitutional for the army to take over power after the president resigns, but the army used the mobilization of the people in the streets to legitimate its leadership.*¹⁸⁰⁰

The Caesarist intervention of the SCAF was neither progressive, nor qualitative. The generals were already a part of *al-nizam*, and they didn't carry out a coup against themselves. Al-Badil editor Khaled al-Balshy pondered that:

*We were forced to deal with this organization [the military] in Egypt because it was the only stable organization within the ex-regime... Not because they are heroes. Now we are forced into negotiations with the army for the benefit of the people, which is ironical because the majority of the leadership of the army is part of the ex-regime. A revolution where we should negotiate our rights is in my opinion not a revolution at all. What happened in Egypt until now is only replacing the existing dictatorship with the rule of the army.*¹⁸⁰¹

¹⁷⁹⁹ See *Chapter 8 Nasserism*.

¹⁸⁰⁰ Interview with Menal Khaled, Cairo, 25 March 2011.

¹⁸⁰¹ Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo, 14 March 2011.

By sacrificing the Mubarak clan and some elements of the police dictatorship, the SCAF hoped to protect the political and economic status quo, but with themselves reaping the fruits of neoliberal reform instead of their erstwhile competitors. Thus the Caesarist intervention of 2011 was essentially “reactionary” and “quantitative”.¹⁸⁰²

Secondly, the 25 January Revolution had developed itself more fully as a revolutionary activity-system than the “riots” that enticed the Free Officers to take power. Whereas Nasser’s coup took place in a period of disorganization of both the State and the mass movements, the SCAF intervention was timed at the high point of the revolutionary process and faced a self-confident and militant popular Subject. For most of the protesters who accepted the SCAF’s role as guardian of the “democratic transition process” this supervising role was but temporarily and conditionally. For example, Alaa Abd al-Fattah, a youth activist, claimed that: *“The military are the custodians of this particular stage in the process, and we’re fine with that, but it has to be temporary.”*¹⁸⁰³

People often expressed their confidence in their own collective agency to keep the SCAF in check and claimed that they knew now that they could and would return to the streets when something did not work out as they wanted it to be. Regardless of the practical truth of this sentiment, it pointed towards an intuition among demobilized protesters that the post-Mubarak relations of power were not yet consolidated, and that they, rather than being defeated by the counter-revolution, were merely giving the SCAF a mandate to realize their demands. The balance of power between masses and the SCAF was not established by the fall of Mubarak, but it was determined by the struggle for hegemony and domination that followed the moment of uprising in the protracted revolutionary process.

Winners and Losers

When Mubarak left the presidency on 11 February, the power structure of *al-nizam* had been reconfigured. The post-Mubarak era counted “losers” and

¹⁸⁰² Although one cannot exclude the possibility of the SCAF moving towards more radical reforms in favor of the subaltern classes when confronted with old (NDP, police and “neoliberal” remnants) and new (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists) political competitors. Just as the class character of Nasserist Caesarism changed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the nature of the military’s role may transform under pressure of domestic or geopolitical pressure.

¹⁸⁰³ In Shenker 2011e.

“winners” among the forces of the neo-liberal bloc. In the political domain, the networks and structures of the NDP and the Ministry of Interior were superseded by those of the SCAF. The physical burning of the NDP headquarters in Cairo during the uprising symbolically anticipated the collapse of this State structure. On 5 February top NDP leaders, including Gamal Mubarak, resigned, but the new “liberal” chairman, Hossam Badrawi, could not stop the disintegration of the State party. Within a week he left the NDP as well, and a large number of members and officials followed in his wake, until the party was formally dissolved on 16 April 2011 by court order. The defeat of the police forces after the first Friday of Anger shook the psychological foundations of the Ministry of Interior – a devastating blow to the morale of the police apparatus from which it still had not recovered a year after Mubarak’s fall.¹⁸⁰⁴ It took two months before the police dared to show its face again on the streets, and even then it still did not command any respect or fear from the population.¹⁸⁰⁵ The buildings of the hated SSI were attacked and raided by protesters during the 25 January uprising and also on 4 and 5 March, when angry demonstrators got hold of sensitive documents.¹⁸⁰⁶ Under pressure of the street movement, the Ministry of Interior disbanded the SSI on 15 March 2011, replacing the structure with the “Egyptian Homeland Security”.

Yet unlike the NDP, the apparatus of the Interior Ministry remained largely intact, because it was still a useful and necessary instrument of coercion. The military had little interest in ruling Egypt directly, firstly because it was unfit to deal with domestic “crowd control”; and secondly because it rather wished to elevate itself above civil and political society, playing the part of arbiter between different political and economic factions of the ruling classes. Hazem Kandil argued that:

The officer corps is often content, as in Turkey or Latin America, with setting up a political process in which there are competing parties, and then stepping back to act as the guardian of the system it has just created—intervening only when necessary through warnings or limited ‘corrective’ coups.¹⁸⁰⁷

¹⁸⁰⁴ Knell 2012.

¹⁸⁰⁵ Muhammad Waked in Bassam and Abu-Rish 2011.

¹⁸⁰⁶ Carlstrom 2011.

¹⁸⁰⁷ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

However, the relative weight of the Interior Ministry in the ensemble of power relations and structures that make up the Egyptian State declined significantly.¹⁸⁰⁸

In the economic field, the neoliberal clique surrounding Gamal Mubarak had to make way for the military and civil “national capitalists”:

*You have to separate between two kinds of businessmen. The nationalist ones, like the army for example, like Naguib Sawiris, or Hossam al-Badrawy, ...this kind of nationalist businessmen were against the businessmen around Gamal Mubarak, because they sold Egyptian lands and many assets and give priority to foreign investors, not national investors, so there was a great conflict of interests between them. The army tried to get rid of these businessmen and Gamal Mubarak himself, this is very important.*¹⁸⁰⁹

Jack Shenker claimed that: “Behind the scenes many business leaders have been furious with the regime for years over the hurdles placed in their way when they wanted to expand. A lot of people you might think are in bed with Mubarak have privately lost patience with it for some time.”¹⁸¹⁰ Some analysts, such as Paul Amar, saw in the construction activities of national capitalists such as Sawiris a form of “developmentalism” that was opposed to the cronyism and corruption of the neoliberal faction.¹⁸¹¹ However, through the process of State-sponsored subcontracting, the construction sector had been a client of rent distribution as well. Regardless of their “national” ideology, military and civil capitalists were primarily interested in getting their share of the rent producing machine that Egyptian state capitalism had degenerated into. Medhat al-Zahed concluded that the root problem of the neoliberal capitalists was that their corruption and monopolization of economic resources threatened “...the strategic interests of the class as a whole...”¹⁸¹² Not the process of privatization, liberalization, and subcontracting *an sich*, but the distribution of its benefits among a small clique had led to misgivings about the Mubarak “regime” within the property-owning classes. As I discussed previously, because of the process of “state capitalism in reverse”, the State increasingly lost its position as a “universal capitalist” and had become the particular tool of a fraction of the ruling classes. Even though the

¹⁸⁰⁸ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁸⁰⁹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁸¹⁰ Shenker 2011d; Also see Amar 2011a.

¹⁸¹¹ Amar 2011b.

¹⁸¹² Interview with Medhat al-Zahed, Cairo, 9 November 2010.

SCAF moved in to protect its own particular interests, at least its intervention reinforced the State as the defender of the “common good”.

Framing the post-Mubarak economic struggle as a battle between corrupt, neoliberal “crony capitalists” and military and civil developmentalist “national capitalists” obscures, in my opinion, the more fundamental clash between workers and capitalists. Walter Ambrust summarized the problem of the concept of corruption succinctly:

*To describe blatant exploitation of the political system for personal gain as corruption misses the forest for the trees. Such exploitation is surely an outrage against Egyptian citizens, but calling it corruption suggests that the problem amounts to aberrant behavior from a system that would otherwise function smoothly.*¹⁸¹³

The partial cleansing of the political and economic apparatus from “corrupt” bureaucrats and “neoliberal” businessmen – *tathir* – diverted the attention of the public away from the activities of the Armed Forces, and weakened the military’s competitors. The SCAF had no interest in reinforcing the public sector, which became evident in the opposition of the SCAF against court rulings in favor of workers wanting to renationalize some of the privatized companies, such as Omar Effendi, Ghazl Shebeen, Tanta for Linen, El-Nasr for Steam Boilers and El-Nile for Cotton Ginning. Conversely, economic concessions to the poor and working classes should be seen as a *political* tactic of dealing with these social movements, rather than evidence of a fundamentally new *economic* policy.¹⁸¹⁴

One of the less obvious losers of the revolution was the Coptic Church, as Sabry Zaky explained:

It is a sensitive issue, I know that. I’m not speaking about Copts, but the Church as an institute. The Church fears the rise of the Islamists, the Church responds to events, it doesn’t have the initiative because of this fear. If you are afraid you do not have the ability to take the initiative. The Church itself didn’t try to participate in the events. Shenouda himself did not say anything about the revolution. During the revolution he called upon the people to go home and after... Mubarak [stepped down] he didn’t say anything even during the Sunday address of the Church... So the Church and Shenouda are afraid of the rise of the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and there is something else. During the last ten years the Church

¹⁸¹³ Ambrust 2011a.

¹⁸¹⁴ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

tried the whole time to bring back [the millet] system. According to this system the Church will govern its own people. It has its own law and tries to get court cases and rulings, like this. This was very clear during the last couple of years. Shenouda... asked all the time to revert court cases if it was against the Church, with regard to marriage for example. There was a case, for example, of a Christian man who wanted to divorce, who went to court to marry again. Shenouda tried to appeal this ruling. The Church wanted to bring back the millet system. The revolution will destroy his dreams. Actually I'm against this. I want all Christians and Copts to be like Muslims, in the sense that we are all Egyptian nationals, citizens, participating in political life, not to be inside the Church and taking orders from Shenouda or anyone else. [laughs]

This kind of system tries to bring back the situation before the 1919 revolution. In 1919 there was the slogan of Christians and Muslims are one hand. That was years ago... Some businessmen of the NDP, together with the Ministry of Interior and with the sanction of the Church ignited the current clashes between Muslims and Christians, this sectarian strife.¹⁸¹⁵

From the 1980s onwards the Coptic Church supported Mubarak as its guardian and protector vis-à-vis the growing influence of radical and puritanical Islam. Fear of losing its already feeble position in Egyptian society drove the institution into the arms of the counter-revolution, which, in turn, weakened its legitimacy in the post-Mubarak era. Both the projects of an Islamic and civil State were opposed to its sectarian goal of ruling its own religious subjects.

Brothers or Comrades?

The intricate role of the Armed Forces in the revolutionary process shows that the distinction between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces is not always straightforward and static. Pressure from the mass movement (or their own rank-and-file) can force agents into a political role they play reluctantly. They may develop a position of assistance, be it often in a colonizing or commodifying way. To a certain extent the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood reflected that of the military during the 25 January uprising. The Society's leadership was anxious of the regime's repression should it join the 25 January protests, and suspicious of the development of the popular Subject as a self-determining and self-organizing force, but it participated in the revolutionary activity-system because, on the one

¹⁸¹⁵ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

hand, it was pushed by its enthusiastic membership,¹⁸¹⁶ and, on the other, it realized that the insurrection constituted an opportunity to swing the balance of power in its favor.

Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood leadership refused to participate in the planned protests on 25 January, many of its youth members played an important role in organizing the first demonstrations. Muhammad Abbas, an *Ikhwan* youth leader claimed that:

*The Guidance Bureau said that they gave the freedom to their members in the governorates to protest. For example, in October City, the chairman of the Bureau there, uploaded a video before 25 January to call on people to participate. They gave freedom for members to participate. Those who want to participate individually are allowed. This was a message in one of the most stressful periods of the Brotherhood. If you read the situation politically you will see that they implicitly called for participation. Should they have said “don’t participate”, people would not have participated. From the first moment of this invitation, large groups of Ikhwan organized together with other tendencies such as 6 April, leftists, al-Baradei supporters, al-Gabha militants. We contacted them before the 25th and we agreed on how to protest on the 25th and after it. We had a plan.*¹⁸¹⁷

The participation of *Ikhwan* youth activists from the very beginning of the revolution was generally recognized by other revolutionary actors. Gihan Shabeen of the SRC asserted that:

*They participated in the revolution. They had a major role in the revolution. On the 25th the organization refused to be on the streets, but the youth group – and I know this because I was close to them – they were part of the Alliance who organized the demos on the 25th.*¹⁸¹⁸

Mustafa Bassiouny of the RS emphasized that:

During the first days of the revolution the Ikhwan said that they would not participate in the protests, but later, from the Friday of Anger on, they began to participate in an open and clear way. On 28 January there was the prayer at noon, led by a famous Ikhwan leader. From then on the Ikhwan were clearly in the

¹⁸¹⁶ Alexander 2011c: 544.

¹⁸¹⁷ Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁸¹⁸ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

*streets. Even though they didn't show their signs, their organization was clearly present in the square.*¹⁸¹⁹

Sabry Zaky acknowledged that the Muslim Brotherhood was pressured by its youth organization, first to allow its activists to participate in the 25 January protests, and then to join in the protests on Friday 28 January.¹⁸²⁰ Muhammad Ali, an *Ikhwan* teacher recalled that on Friday 28 January the Society formally participated in the protests "...from the Murshid to the lowest members, including me, one of the lowest members of the Muslim Brotherhood."¹⁸²¹ Muhammad Abbas explained that Brotherhood members, when they entered into the revolutionary activity-system, did not try to colonize or commodify the movement, but supported the popular Project through genuine solidarity:

The role of the Ikhwan was very clear in the square. They were a concrete force which stayed and slept in the square...

*During the revolution, in the square, the leaders of Ikhwan were in the square with the youth coalition. There was no decision which was not taken by the youth of the coalition, the youth of Ikhwan took the decision up to our leaders and they had to agree. We had a decision that the icons of the Ikhwan should not appear during the revolution... When they appeared they did not appear as members of Ikhwan, but as parliamentarians or committee members. The entrances and exits of the square were organized and controlled by the Ikhwan. The largest political enemy for Ikhwan said that if there were no Ikhwan in the square people would have been killed and executed.*¹⁸²²

Gihan Shabeen conceded that "...Wednesday 2 February, during the camel battle, and the evening with the molotovs and bullets... they played a major role in protecting Tahrir. They have the "staff" to do this."¹⁸²³ Genuine solidarity is focused on the development and the emancipation of the other Subject. Substituting oneself for the movement was a form of colonization that the Brotherhood was not guilty of. Even with its formidable "staff" of relatively loyal, organized activists, the Brotherhood would not, and could not, lead protests of millions.¹⁸²⁴ For most

¹⁸¹⁹ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁸²⁰ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁸²¹ Interview with Muhammad Ali, Cairo, 27 March 2011.

¹⁸²² Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁸²³ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸²⁴ Bayat 2011a; [Blogs.aljazeera.net](http://blogs.aljazeera.net) 2011g; Sallam, Stacher and Toensing 2011.

secular activists and observers this was a reassuring fact, as its presence in the revolution had conjured images of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

On the other hand, solidary instruction and assistance only pushes the development of a Subject forward when it is proleptic: when it helps to develop the forms of thought and activity to a higher level. The Society's reluctance to organize and direct the masses also weakened the movement. Gihan Ibrahim of the RS gave the example of the indecisiveness of Said al-Husayni, the *Ikhwan* MP in Mahalla:

*I was telling him that this is your time, your moment, your call for strike in Mahalla and do that and so on. And he told me, well... you do it. You know. I'm like what do you mean, this is what you've been waiting for. This is the moment you can actually lead and take charge of these masses. You have the masses, so move the masses, mobilize the masses. [laughs]*¹⁸²⁵

Although the Brothers did not lead the protests, this did not mean that there were no frictions between them and other revolutionary actors over slogans, pamphlets, the use of megaphones, et cetera.¹⁸²⁶ These small conflicts are reminiscent of the cooperation between Brothers, socialists, liberals and nationalists during the civil-democratic movement of the last decade.¹⁸²⁷

During the insurrectionary phase of the 25 January Revolution, in general, Muslim Brothers stood side by side with the other protesters and were often the most militant and resilient demonstrators and occupiers. After the fall of Mubarak, the attitude of the leadership changed, however, as it cautiously supported the "soft coup" – much to the anger of radical liberals, socialists, and nationalists.¹⁸²⁸ Whereas the Caesarist intervention constituted an obstacle in the trajectory of the revolutionary Subject, it was an opportunity for the Brotherhood leadership to assert itself as a hegemonic force: a social power able to lead Egyptian society. As an organization, the Society moved from a revolutionary to a counter-revolutionary position, calling upon the protesters to leave Tahrir Square and start negotiations with the SCAF.¹⁸²⁹ In March 2011, Hisham Fouad of the RS

¹⁸²⁵ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁸²⁶ Interview with Ahmed Belal, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁸²⁷ See *Chapter 13 Islamism in the Neoliberal Age*.

¹⁸²⁸ Interview with Ahmed al-Gourd, Cairo, 24 March 2011; Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011; Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 10 March 2011; See Alexander 2011c.

¹⁸²⁹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

was still careful in his analysis of the position of the Brotherhood in the revolution:

There is a dialogue [between the SCAF and the MB]. This does not mean that they are against the people with regard to all demands. They will fight to abolish the emergency law. They will fight for a lot of things. But they will avoid fighting the regime directly. They also want stability in the factories and their members in the factories are trying to convince the workers to wait, to be calm... They play a role to bring back "stability" but we cannot say they are completely against the revolution.¹⁸³⁰

Mustafa Bassiouny noted that:

After Mubarak retired, the Ikhwan established a good relation with the regime. The constitutional amendments, the attacks on the strikes and the call to bring back the police render this connection obvious. The coming days will render this connection between the Ikhwan and the regime even more explicit.¹⁸³¹

Gihan Ibrahim shrugged:

This is what they always stood for... They only came... when there will be elections, or towards the end of the revolution, when it became clear that Mubarak is going... They are professionals, they are elites, they are businessmen, economically, their interests lie strongly with the old regime. It is not surprisingly that they are now pushing to protect those interests, and using the religion factor to mobilize the masses like they have always done. If you look at their agenda they are a very neoliberal, conservative force.

The Muslim Brotherhood is as much a part of the old regime as anything else. They have constantly been utilized and coopted by the regime and they are what they are because of the regime.¹⁸³²

With regard to the worker strikes, which had been welcomed as part of the democratic revolution, after the fall of Mubarak the Brotherhood condemned them as destabilizing and particularist.¹⁸³³ Essam al-Erian explicitly said that "...the workers' strikes are not an expression of the revolutionary demand of social

¹⁸³⁰ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁸³¹ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁸³² Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁸³³ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

justice.”¹⁸³⁴ Because of their weak presence in the independent trade union movement:

*The Ikhwan changed their own policies. Now they are saying they want to kick out all the old regime leaders in the state unions and syndicates, but the workers refuse this strategy because they know that the Ikhwan want to occupy these positions for themselves. The Ikhwan want new elections because they are the ones who would reap the benefits from these elections.*¹⁸³⁵

The collapse of the NDP left a political vacuum which neither the SCAF nor the existing “opposition” parties could fill. The Brotherhood leadership was conscious of its potential to play the part of power broker between the generals and the popular masses: “The Brotherhood leadership has made strenuous efforts to present itself to the military as a valuable partner based partly on its ability to mobilise and demobilise popular protest.”¹⁸³⁶ Playing its traditional game of balancing between opposition and ruling groups it hoped to become a political force *incontournable* in the post-Mubarak era and the main representation of the common good: “Ikhwan should represent society from the head to the toe: workers, doctors... The interests of the Ikhwan are the interests of the whole people.”¹⁸³⁷ Sabry Zaky vividly portrayed the Society’s pragmatic politics:

*The Muslim Brotherhood plays all the time two roles, they stand with one leg in the regime and with the other in the opposition... And they believe that, if you stand like this [stands with feet adjacent to each other], anyone can push you. But if you stand like this [stands with feet wide apart], no one can push you. [laughs] So, they are keeping all the time one leg here and one leg there.*¹⁸³⁸

Ironically, the Brothers’ “Islamization” of the 19 March constitutional referendum may have won them the vote, but, as Hisham Sallam pointed out:

...the configuration of support for and against the constitutional amendments reinforced traditional ideological divisions within Egypt’s political arena, with Islamist-oriented groups along with salafi leaders supporting the yes vote, while most non-Islamist groups and the Coptic Orthodox Church favored a no vote. The

¹⁸³⁴ Interview with Siham Shewada, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

¹⁸³⁵ Ibid. Also see Alexander 2011c: 536.

¹⁸³⁶ Alexander 2011c: 536.

¹⁸³⁷ Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁸³⁸ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

*salience of these divisions in post-Mubarak politics has been increasing since the constitutional referendum.*¹⁸³⁹

The sectarianization of political society, (re-)added the layer of “Islamists” versus “seculars” on top of the more profound revolutionary contradictions between, put simply: democracy and authoritarianism; political and social revolution; direct and representative politics. Even though this sectarianization may have steered the political debate into a domain dominated by Muslim Brothers and Salafists, it also made it much more difficult for those forces to present themselves as the universal expressions of the national, Egyptian interest.

Does all of this make the Brotherhood a counter-revolutionary force? With regard to the Society as an institution, I am inclined to say yes, because, much like the SCAF, the Brotherhood presented itself as a Savior-Ruler instead of assisting *al-sha'b* in the development of its own self-emancipating neoformations. Democratizing and changing some of *al-nizam's* aspects on behalf of the people makes the Society a *revolutionizing* but not a *revolutionary* force as it reinforces its own position and substitutes its own agency for that of the popular activity-system. Furthermore, “...there is nothing in the group's ideology which opposes private property or the profit motive per se – and its policies are essentially continuous with the liberalisations of Mubarak's government, not least because key Brotherhood leaders are themselves businessmen.”¹⁸⁴⁰ Whereas the *Ikhwan* may reform some of the political aspects of the State apparatus, it is not principally opposed to the neoliberal strategy of accumulation. The Brotherhood's desired reconfiguration of the Mubarak neoliberal bloc entails a reversal of the relations of domination within the domestic “private” capitalist classes: a substitution of the clique around Gamal Mubarak and Ahmed Ezz – which was ousted from the commanding heights of political society – with its own capitalist leaders such as Khayrat al-Shater. Neither the role of the Armed Forces nor the position of foreign capital in the Egyptian economy is challenged by the Society's leadership. As such its class interests are objectively in opposition to the completion of the revolutionary Project.

¹⁸³⁹ Sallam 2011b.

¹⁸⁴⁰ Teti and Gervasio 2012: 111.

On the other hand, youth members and reformist leaders increasingly revolted against the counter-revolutionary course of the leadership. Already in March 2011, Sabry Zaky prophesized that:

*...this organization has many different kinds of people who have many different kinds of interests. So there is a kind of conflict of interests in this organization. There are the businessmen in the organization, and they are with the military because they know that the military is a nationalist middle class businessmen and they deal with them in the same way. This wing will try to be with the army, but the youth itself within the organization will think in a different way. They want to join the civil movement.*¹⁸⁴¹

Ikhwan youth leader Muhammad Abbas voiced a discourse of nationalism, rather than Islamism, and hoped that the Brotherhood could become the main force in a national, civil-democratic bloc:

Now the face of the Brotherhood is the face of Tahrir. In the next period we will forge a relation of confidence with society in order to go through this period.

One of the effects of the revolution was that the drops of rain in different places and in different times, the alliances which happened, were united. Before the revolution there were already coalitions around certain demands. The revolution brought all the Egyptian people together and put the ideologies aside.

*Until now we haven't finished the revolution... In the first elections however I want all popular forces to go in the same direction to achieve our demands... We should first finish the program which we were united around.*¹⁸⁴²

When I met Abbas he was still firmly of the opinion that the Society could contain its centrifugal forces: “ *...there will be some differences, but no conflicts. We all work on the same base, but our strategies are different. We are all under the umbrella of Ikhwan and a part of the movement. And we will not work outside the organization.*”¹⁸⁴³ Yet a few months later, he was working outside the Brotherhood, as a leader in the Islamic-leftist Egyptian Current Party.

Ex-Brotherhood member and historian Muhammad al-Hamy estimated that a year after Mubarak's fall, half of the Society's political youth members had left the

¹⁸⁴¹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴² Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴³ Ibid.

organization.¹⁸⁴⁴ Some became politically inactive; others joined new Islamist parties or movements to the right or the left of the Brotherhood's own Freedom and Justice Party.¹⁸⁴⁵ With regard to the strikes, some individual leaders such as Yosry Bayumi continued to support the workers' movement independently from the Brothers' "party line".¹⁸⁴⁶ Muhammad Abbas claimed:

*We agree with the rights of workers and we are also against the law of stopping the strikes... It is not logical that the government which came from the revolution now criminalizes the revolution. [laughs] But the change must come from the top. These figures must be kicked out. These are our demands. The demand for stability will kill the revolution.*¹⁸⁴⁷

In a way, the 25 January Revolution more forcefully interpellated civil-democratic Subjectivities among the Muslim Brothers than the Society was able to impose its Islamist project on the popular activity-system. From the perspective of the development of the revolutionary activity-system as a social Subject, the main divide in the Society was between those members who primarily saw the revolution as a spring-board for the Islamist project – i.e. the colonizing view – and those who saw the Islamist project as a pillar of support for the popular revolution – i.e. the solidary perspective. Being a huge movement consisting of various and contradicting social layers and projects, the Brotherhood was turned upside down by revolutionary events, leading to individuals and factions splitting away. However, the instruction of the revolutionary Project diminished as its participants were demobilized and their demands mediated by the SCAF and "professional" politicians. Even when thousands of activists left the Brotherhood, the core still remained a mass movement of hundreds of thousands of members and sympathizers.¹⁸⁴⁸

The Struggle for/against Normalization

With hindsight, the decade before 2011 could be grasped as the preparatory phase of the 25 January Revolution. The civil-democratic and workers' movement laid the foundations of the networks, practices, discourses and traditions of struggle

¹⁸⁴⁴ Shams al-Din 2012.

¹⁸⁴⁵ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴⁶ Interview with Siham Shewada, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴⁷ Interview with Muhammad Abbas, Cairo, 28 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴⁸ Teti and Gervasio 2012: 110.

that resurfaced in the mass protests of January and February 2011. The concept of *al-sha'b* and *al-nizam*, the main players of the revolutionary drama, matured through these preparatory fights. The protests of 25 January initiated a second phase in the revolution, the uprising or insurrection, whereby the revolution developed from a dormant Subject-in-itself towards a Subject-for-itself. The popular Subjectivity became explicit and concrete through its activity in the streets. The generalization and systematization of this activity gave the empty signifier of *al-sha'b* a social body, just as the actions of the counter-revolutionary forces directed against the self-organizing and self-determining popular movement – the police, the *baltageyya*, the State media, Mubarak, Suleiman, the vacillating Western governments, et cetera – constructed those powers as the real, social body of *al-nizam*. Even though, when deconstructed in thought, “the regime” was but an aggregate of heterogeneous and contradictory forces, this imagery was interpellated, constructed, and materialized by the discourses and practices of the mass movement during the 25 January Revolution.

After the fall of Mubarak the revolution entered a phase of disintegration of the popular Subject, the differentiation and crystallization of the different opposition and regime forces, and a struggle for social/civil and political hegemony. In political society, the SCAF, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, secular liberals and nationalists, and the Left did their best to prove that they were the most capable force to defend the Egyptian “national good”. In civil society, it was confronted with the ebb and flow of spontaneous civil-democratic and class movements which either tried to influence the existing political powers, construct their own hegemonic apparatuses, or ignore “party politics” altogether. Hisham Fouad claimed that:

*The state tries to organize itself again, and the revolutionaries try to organize themselves. It is a battle. We forced the State to dispel Ahmed Shafiq and bring in Essam Sharaf and we won this battle. We said that we are against the referendum and against the constitutional amendments and that we want a new constitution. Who will win this battle? We will see. The State tries to put pressure on the workers and peasants not to strike and to protest, but the workers continue their strikes and this is another battle. We will see in these transitional months a lot of battles...*¹⁸⁴⁹

¹⁸⁴⁹ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

The fall of Mubarak, the salient face of *al-nizam*, opened up a period of small-scale battles with more specific demands, whereby the revolutionary Project tried to redefine itself and its object of activity. The continuation of mass strikes and clashes between the “street” and the “transition regime” from below stood in stark contrast to the normalization and consolidation of political society from above. The drive for “normalization” was spearheaded by the SCAF and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. The goal of normalization was putting an end to “chaos” and creating a stable political and economic platform from which the “transition process” could take off.

The substance of normalization was the demobilization and atomization of the popular Subject. From the perspective of the development of the masses into a self-determining Subject, “normalization” was the label of the post-Mubarak counter-revolution. The dual character of the revolution, with its roots in the civil-democratic and class struggles of the 2000s, also entailed a dual normalization or counter-revolutionary process.

The first mode of normalization entailed the demobilization of the masses, an end to the occupation of Tahrir Square and the reassertion of representative politics, i.e. external-colonial mediation of the popular Subject: *“There were those who said that the revolution was great and started on the 25th and ended on the 11th and that now it is the time to go home and celebrate the event each year, but that the revolution is in the past.”*¹⁸⁵⁰ The essence of political counter-revolution was the active reversal of the spontaneous process whereby the masses *“...break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new régime.”*¹⁸⁵¹

The second mode was directed against the mass strikes. This form of counter-revolution was less subtle, as often the legitimacy of workers as a social Subject was simply brushed aside. Workers’ strikes were portrayed as unpatriotic, parochialist, selfish and against the national interest. I have already discussed this process in *Chapter 24 Workers and the Revolution*.

The past and present of the revolution were rewritten: some revolutionary actors were excluded as genuine participants in the activity-system of *al-sha’b*,

¹⁸⁵⁰ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁵¹ Trotsky 2001: 17.

such as striking workers, whilst, other, counter-revolutionary forces were included.¹⁸⁵² After the fall of Mubarak everyone claimed to be part of the national-popular Subject and some powers that had supported the regime throughout the 25 January insurrection now hid, sometimes literally, behind the Egyptian flag. Mobinil and Vodaphone set up giant billboards in the national colors with the slogan “We are all Egyptians”. Shops like ADIDAS painted their windows as Egyptian flags in order to prevent people from smashing them. Disjoined from its concrete activity in the streets, the abstract character of *al-sha’b* became a nationalistic meta-narrative, an empty signifier, which could easily be “filled” by any political or economic force seeking legitimacy.

The military Caesarism of the SCAF spilled over to a civil Caesarism in the form of controlled representative politics.¹⁸⁵³ The outcome of the 19 March referendum in 2011 on the constitutional amendments and the subsequent parliamentary elections reflected a growing “Islamist”¹⁸⁵⁴ and “parliamentary”¹⁸⁵⁵ consensus in political society, which seemed to separate itself from the continued mobilization in the workplaces and streets in civil society. Within political society there emerged a situation of “dual power” between the Islamist-dominated parliament and the Ministry of Defense. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists – which had argued for swift parliamentary elections in order to cash in on their organizational and discursive advantage vis-à-vis other opposition forces – now realized their victory was a pyrrhic one, as parliament was still governed by the old constitution that did not even grant them the right to form a cabinet of their own choice. A race began between parliament, which established a

¹⁸⁵² Sallam 2011c.

¹⁸⁵³ Many analysts stressed that the SCAF genuinely wanted a swift “transition of power” in order to continue their primary economic and military activities. However, Joshua Stacher observed that: “One should not... mistake the army’s reluctance to govern for aversion to rule.” (Stacher 2011b) Whereas the SCAF desired to get rid of formal rule, they aimed to reinforce their position within the neoliberal bloc. The politically motivated dissolution of the newly elected and Islamist-dominated parliament in June 2012 showed that the military was reluctant to loosen its grasp over political society.

¹⁸⁵⁴ I suggest that the victories of the Brotherhood and the Salafists in the referendum and parliamentary elections expressed the perception among the population-as-voters that these forces, at that specific juncture, were best equipped to politically lead society, rather than a call for the religious-ideological Islamization of the revolution.

¹⁸⁵⁵ The idea that the crisis of Egyptian society could be solved through the ballot-box and representative politics, rather than continued mass mobilizations and grassroots interventions of *al-sha’b* in the reshaping of *al-nizam*.

committee to write a new constitution that would expand its powers, and the executive – i.e. the SCAF – which began legal proceedings to contest the constitutionality of parliament. On 14 June 2012 the High Constitutional Court dissolved Parliament, and the SCAF took over legislative powers – preparing the outcome of the final round of the presidential elections that were held on Saturday 16 and Sunday 17 June 2012.

Ironically, it was exactly the divide between the “parliamentary” fight and the struggle in the streets and workplaces that weakened the opposition parties vis-à-vis the SCAF-dominated political society. Gihan Shabeen of the SRC criticized the Brotherhood for abandoning the mass movement in favor of an uneasy alliance with the SCAF:

*You can say that there is some alliance now between them and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not a permanent alliance. This is why the reformists are crazy in my point of view. Whenever the pressure of the people will weaken, the first thing the SCAF will do is putting the Muslim Brothers in jail. It is this way all the time. Reformists cannot see the power of the people.*¹⁸⁵⁶

In addition, the stronger the Islamist parties became, the more the SCAF was able to play up fears among secular liberal, nationalist, and leftist opposition forces about the danger of an imminent Islamization of society. Without the will or ability to mobilize a social base against the Islamists, the secular parties could not but look for protection among the military against the “threat” of Islamism.¹⁸⁵⁷

In conclusion, the main challenge posed by the SCAF and other political forces to the popular Subject was their colonization of the revolution: the assertion that the popular Subject could only liberate itself through external mediation instead of its own objectifications. In order to overcome this obstacle, the popular Subject had to construct for itself the capacity to lead society, to develop its own hegemonic center, apparatus, and pedagogy – a revolutionary Prince.

¹⁸⁵⁶ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁵⁷ This episode strongly mirrored the “secular alliance” that Mubarak initiated in the 1990s and which led parties such as *Tagammu* into a politics of disengagement with the street. See *Chapter 12 The Civil-Democratic Movement*, *Chapter 18 Roads to Counter-Hegemony*, and *Chapter 26 The Revolutionary Prince*.

CHAPTER 26

The Revolutionary Prince

...the left today... is in a very critical and pivotal moment where we can completely lead and take a strong stand, or completely be buried and face another decade of mobilizing at a minimum level like we have been doing for decades.

Gihan "Gigi" Ibrahim, Interview, Cairo, 20 March 2011

The Left, the People, and the Prince

Although the popular activity-system had manifested itself concretely as a social Subject through its revolutionary activity – most explicitly in the Republic of Tahrir – its forms of self-mediation and self-consciousness were still in an embryonic state. The Project's spontaneous objectifications lacked coherence, stability and systematization, and it merely developed an abstract consciousness of itself as "the people", and of its antagonist as "the regime": it did not mature a true self-concept and a political-economic critique of the neoliberal bloc.

The Caesarist intervention cut short the popular developmental process towards Subjectness, or rather, it inserted obstacles on the pathway of the revolutionary Subject, which had to be overcome through the development of suitable neoformations. As I discussed in *Chapter 22 A Revolutionary Project*, the popular Subject lacked a directive center that would enable it to capture and transform the upper and centralized echelons of State power: "Now, in 2011 we had a real popular revolution, but the army is still in power. Why? We had nothing. We had not a single organization that could take the power."¹⁸⁵⁸

Some intellectuals rejected any directive role for themselves in this revolutionary episode. The cartoonist Salah Abd al-Azim, for example, posited that:

The Egyptian society tasted the fire, I think we should leave them for one year and not direct them to any directions, to see and discuss and learn from their mistakes and so on... I do not want to influence the people. The political consciousness of the people is growing up these days, we shouldn't interfere with this, we should stand by the people and support them in developing all these new attitudes, then

¹⁸⁵⁸ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

we can involve them... Even if the people took a wrong decision they can fix it in a short period.

But the people can't go back to the past. They have broken all the idols of the dictatorship, they won't accept any new dictatorship... With this environment and attitude of the people, there won't be a new dictatorship. The army in this atmosphere cannot take control over everything, the Ikhwan used religious propaganda to direct the people, but the people won't take these wrong ideas again and won't obey any new dictatorship, military or religious.¹⁸⁵⁹

This attitude was born out of, on the one hand, a genuine fear of colonizing the popular Subject, and, on the other, a quasi religious reverence for the autonomous agency of *al-sha'b*. Ironically, often those intellectuals who had underestimated the capacity of the people to overthrow the regime, now overestimated its Subjectness.

Most leftist intellectuals, however, argued that “...there is a leftist tendency in the revolution. Perhaps it is not clear, but we can see the tendency through the huge masses on the streets, who were in the street by millions and millions...”¹⁸⁶⁰ The task of the Left was to help developing this tendency into a hegemonic force. However, the dissolution of the collaborative activity of the popular Subject, and its differentiation into a variety of opposing Projects, divided and fragmented the Left on fundamental ideological, tactical, and strategic questions.

Revolutionary Tactics

To Occupy or Not to Occupy

After the fall of Mubarak, there was a discussion within the revolutionary movement if protesters should continue occupying Midan Tahrir or not. Gihan Shabeen explained that:

There are people who think that we cannot stop now and that we have to continue this revolution... In another way, even the minimal democratic demands we cannot realize these demands unless the mobilization of the masses. There are those people who want to demobilize the people and there are those who want the mobilization to continue and to let the people feel that there is a change in their life.¹⁸⁶¹

¹⁸⁵⁹ Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.

¹⁸⁶⁰ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁶¹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

Tahrir had become not only the salient symbol of revolutionary resistance, it had also developed into a strategy of *al-sha'b* to transform *al-nizam*, and into a discrete activity-system that projected the capability of popular self-governance. Tahrir was the soul of the revolution, and to abandon this liberated space would jeopardize the entire revolutionary process. Organized and experienced political activists realized that the Caesarist intervention was just another obstacle in the development of the revolution, and they pushed for a continued occupation of the Square in order to achieve a transformation of *al-nizam*: “Now the demand for a constituent assembly is crucial. It is not the military or technocrats who should decide the new constitution but a democratic assembly composed of recognised delegates from the people.”¹⁸⁶² The role of political activists and intellectuals was “...pushing people to collect themselves again in the Square on Fridays and stop this normalization of revolutionary activity.”¹⁸⁶³

The Tahrir mobilizations still had an effect after the fall of Mubarak. For example, protesters succeeded in putting enough pressure on the SCAF to fire Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq on 3 March and replace him with Essam Sharaf who had a better standing with the masses, because he had participated in the 25 January protests – even though he had served as Minister of Transportation in 2004 and 2005. Under pressure of the Tahrir occupiers, Sharaf reshuffled his cabinet, removing many figures who were perceived as too close to the old regime. After March, Tahrir still welcomed tens of thousands of protesters and occupiers, for example during the Friday of Cleaning on 8 April 2011, the Second Friday of Anger on 27 May 2011, throughout July, the Friday of Correcting the Path on 9 September 2011, and at the eve of the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. Those protesting were increasingly disappointed with the lack of real change and the counter-revolutionary role of the SCAF.¹⁸⁶⁴

However, it became more and more clear that the Caesarist intervention had succeeded in demobilizing and pacifying the majority of protesters. Already in March 2011, Menal Khaled confided in me that: “...I don't love Tahrir anymore. I went to Tahrir and I found people as if they were going to the zoo with their children, taking photos of the tents, and so on.”¹⁸⁶⁵ Apart from a space for ritualistic protest,

¹⁸⁶² 6 April activists in Guardian.co.uk 2011t.

¹⁸⁶³ Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, 30 March 2011.

¹⁸⁶⁴ Muhammad Waked in Bassam and Abu-Rish 2011.

¹⁸⁶⁵ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

Midan Tahrir had become a touristic site of commemoration of the revolutionary uprising where t-shirts and souvenirs were sold – already celebrating the past of the revolt instead of its presence or future. Sabry Zaky moved that:

Now, staying in Tahrir is an old game. I think it has brought many successes and gains for us, but we have to be creative, because a revolution by definition is a creative thing... It is not ONLY Tahrir Square, we can do this, sure, but at the same time we have to think about other venues and other ways to spread this revolution. ¹⁸⁶⁶

Menal Khaled agreed: “Being in the Square now is only a symbolic movement. You should be in the neighborhoods. Conscious actors and artists should go to the neighborhoods, especially the poor neighborhoods, to raise consciousness, and through their work and movies they should raise awareness.” ¹⁸⁶⁷ Gihan Shabeen explicated that:

...there are people who participated in the revolution, who were part of the marches and the sit-in in Tahrir. They went back to home but they want to continue their activity and there is no party to organize them, because the parties are weak. So they only have the committees that were organized in the revolution itself. Maybe through the influence of some activists they can continue their struggle in their neighborhood, dealing with local problems and so on. I think this will continue until these people will find another way to become a part of the political life. ¹⁸⁶⁸

New Systems of Activity

Let us conceive of the revolution as a protracted collective learning process. The first, preparatory phase, which slowly built up since the 2000s, only engaged small numbers of political activists and a minority of workers – even though the civil-democratic and class mobilizations were bigger than any movement since the 1970s and perhaps even the 1940s. The moment of the uprising, that phase which began with the 25 January protests and ended with the fall of Mubarak and which is often identified with the “revolution” in a narrow sense, drew in, at its high point, millions of ordinary Egyptians. But even the street politics of the revolutionary uprising could not suddenly instruct the whole population. Although thousands continued to protest and occupy Tahrir, the real masses, the

¹⁸⁶⁶ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

¹⁸⁶⁷ Interview with Menal Khaled, Cairo, 25 March 2011.

¹⁸⁶⁸ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

millions who had poured into the streets during the uprising, returned to their homes after the Caesarist intervention, implicitly granting the SCAF a mandate for its emancipation and, explicitly voting for the most conservative and bourgeois political forces in the parliamentary and presidential elections of respectively 2011 and 2012.

In the eyes of many leftists, the offspring of the revolution seemed monstrous. SCAF-organized referenda and elections appeared as a counter-revolutionary attack in a civil-democratic shape. Gihan Ibrahim rejected “...these huge assumptions that... because now the people are in favor of revolution they will never vote for someone who is part of the old regime, or the NDP, which is nonsense in my view...”¹⁸⁶⁹ With regard to the similar anticlimactic outcome of the 1917 February Revolution, Trotsky had offered some comfort: “But in voting for them they created a partition-wall between themselves and their own aims. They could not now move forward at all without bumping into this wall erected by themselves, and knocking it over.”¹⁸⁷⁰ In the same manner, Gihan Ibrahim claimed that:

*Within the working class, the Muslim Brotherhood... they either will lose ground based on economic and social issues, or they will have to reform and become more what the workers, or the masses want, the masses they belong to or the masses that belong to them.*¹⁸⁷¹

Khaled al-Balshy optimistically claimed that:

*In my opinion the majority is understanding what happens in Egypt, but they are weak and frustrated. They lost a lot of energy in the revolution. When they regain energy we can continue the revolution... When the people notice a return to the days of the ex-regime, they will explode again. As long as they see reforms they will remain demobilized. I hope that the army has a stupid desire to return to the ex-regime days, because then there will be a new revolution, even bigger than the last one and maybe we'll have socialism in Egypt then.*¹⁸⁷²

For the revolutionary Project, not the “inherent” conservatism of the “silent majority” was the main obstacle – it had been overcome in the praxis of struggle and it could be overcome again – but the practical divide between “the masses”

¹⁸⁶⁹ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁸⁷⁰ Trotsky 2001: 192.

¹⁸⁷¹ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁸⁷² Interview with Khaled al-Balshy, Cairo 14 March 2011.

and “the vanguard”. The soft coup had cut off the vanguard from its mass base. As Trotsky explained with regard to the 1917 February Revolution:

*A minority of the revolutionary class actually participates in the insurrection, but the strength of that minority lies in the support, or at least sympathy, of the majority. The active and militant minority inevitably puts forward under fire from the enemy its more revolutionary and self-sacrificing element... But the situation changes the moment the victory is won and its political fortification begins. The elections to the organs and institutions of the victorious revolution attract and challenge infinitely broader masses than those who battled with arms in their hands.*¹⁸⁷³

The first task for leftists wanting to assist in the development of the popular Subject was to reconnect the vanguard to its mass basis and reconstitute the revolutionary activity-system. While opinions within the Left differed strongly on the validity and usefulness of participating in elections, most organized leftists in the RS, SRC, and UESY realized that, if the vanguard could not mobilize the masses into the streets, it would have to go to the masses and bring the “spirit of Tahrir” to the popular neighborhoods and workplaces: “*But if this still-potential vanguard role does not speedily acquire organizational form, memories of Tahrir are likely to fade away.*”¹⁸⁷⁴ “*We have to take Tahrir to the factories now,*” exclaimed blogger and RS activist Hossam al-Hamalawy.¹⁸⁷⁵ Likewise, Gihan Ibrahim asserted that: “*...our battles are not in parliament, but in the factories, in the unions, in setting up the workers’ party, in using these strikes and workers’ power into a political weapon.*”¹⁸⁷⁶

Firstly, the *mobilization* of the masses had to be complemented and reinforced with their *organization* into stable, coherent activity-systems. These organizational forms had not to be “invented” by leftists, as the revolution itself had spawned two spontaneous neoformations of self-organization: the popular or civil committees, and the strike committees. Independent leftist activist Wael Tawfiq stressed that:

For the Left, at this moment, the most important thing is the formation of popular committees in the neighborhoods, but it is difficult... The most important thing is to organize the people themselves, not only the leftists. We should create groups

¹⁸⁷³ Trotsky 2001: 186.

¹⁸⁷⁴ Hazem Kandil in NLR 2011.

¹⁸⁷⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2011a.

¹⁸⁷⁶ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

*from the popular committees to protect the people's demands. Furthermore, we should organize the workers in independent unions. A lot of groups are organizing independent unions. This is the most important step in this phase of the revolution.*¹⁸⁷⁷

Secondly, the development of *local* revolutionary activity-systems had to be accompanied by the construction of *national* structures: subaltern political parties and trade union federations.

Revolutionary Neoformations

Each revolution produces its own neoformations in accordance with its SSoD. In the Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917, the soviets – workers' and soldiers' councils – were the logical products of proletarian uprisings against the disastrous war efforts of czarism. In Egypt, these organic neoformations were the popular committees, the youth movements, and the independent trade unions.

The popular committees were established in response to the withdrawal of police forces from the streets. Because of their vertical and “spatial”¹⁸⁷⁸ – rather than horizontal and “class” – character, their social composition was much more heterogeneous than that of the Russian soviets. Gihan Shabeen explained:

*...some of them are radical, some of them are not. It depends on the location, if they are in Suez or Mahalla, they will be effective, in a poor place in Cairo or Zamalek... You can find committees in al-Ma'adi, in Zamalek and Mohandiseen having police officers, judges and businessmen in the committee. This is not the right committee that I prefer. I prefer committees built on a class basis. But, why not? We had thirty years without any form of organization, so it is a good start that the Egyptian people is no longer atomized.*¹⁸⁷⁹

The civil committees, taken as a whole, expressed the diverse class basis of the whole revolutionary Project. The Republic of Tahrir could be perceived as the biggest and most developed “committee” of them all, produced by the logic of

¹⁸⁷⁷ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁷⁸ In the sense that they were first and foremost neighborhood committees, primarily representing a coherent spatio-social unit. Logically, particular spatial units articulated particular social compositions. A “rich” neighborhood mobilized upper and upper-middle class constituencies; and a “poor” neighborhood was mainly composed of working class people.

¹⁸⁷⁹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

occupation and demonstration. Sinan's comparison of Tahrir with the Paris Commune was probably quite apt.¹⁸⁸⁰

After the fall of Mubarak, activists within the RS, SRC, and UESY tried to consolidate those popular committees with subaltern roots and transform them into committees for the defense of the revolution: *"We hope that these attempts succeed, because this is crucial to the success of the revolution. Even if we only speak about the democratic revolution. Because there is a counter-revolutionary going on, so it is important for the people to be organized in these types of committees."*¹⁸⁸¹

A distrust and disdain for "party politics", especially among new layers of activists, were instrumental in the formation of various "youth movements". Most of these had their roots in pre-revolutionary political activities, such as the 6 April Youth Movement, but others were born in the Republic of Tahrir and other "subsystems" of revolutionary activity, such as the Coalition of (the) Youth (of the) Revolution (CYR). These youth movements were horizontally organized and constituted a loose collection of discrete groups and networks.¹⁸⁸² They played an important role in the continued mobilization of protesters after the fall of Mubarak, but they were unable or unwilling to construct themselves as a more coherent and centralized political force.

The absence of workers as a social Subject in the first two weeks of the 25 January uprising worried leftists with a class perspective on the revolution. Wael Tawfiq recalled:

*The most important question for the Left was: where is the working class and how can we organize it. We began to connect with the worker leaders in many areas and we got a positive reaction from the workers. We encouraged them to become active in the revolution. We distributed this statement in all the big factories in Egypt. This statement made the workers move.*¹⁸⁸³

¹⁸⁸⁰ See *Chapter 23 The Republic of Tahrir*.

¹⁸⁸¹ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁸⁸² For example, the CYR claimed to be composed of the Young Muslim Brotherhood, the Youth Movement for Justice and Freedom, the April 6 Youth, the Young People's Campaign to Support ElBaradei, the Youth of the National Assembly to Change, the Youth Party of Dignity, the Party Youth Delegation, the Youth Party Tomorrow, the Youth Rally, along with independent youths, bloggers, and activists. (See Coalition of Youth Revolution Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/Coalition.Of.Youth.Revolution?sk=info>)

¹⁸⁸³ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

The role of “traditional” leftist intellectuals was modest in encouraging the workers to mobilize and support the popular Project *as* workers. The strikes during the last days of Mubarak reign were largely spontaneous and interpellated by the attempt of the regime to reopen businesses and “normalize” Egypt’s society. But, whereas the working classes and their subaltern allies were demobilized as a popular Subject by the Caesarist intervention, they were mobilized as a proletarian Subject in their workplaces. The demobilization of the democratic protesters in the streets was in inverse proportion to the mobilizations of workers in the factories and companies. While the civil committees were facing disintegration, the strike committees flourished. Those factions among the Left that oriented themselves towards these proletarian neoformations had two goals. Firstly, just as during the five years leading up to the revolution, they encouraged the development of spontaneous, *ad hoc* strike committees into independent trade union structures. Hisham Fouad clarified that:

*...there are a lot of attempts to organize workers in the factories, under different names. These attempts will succeed on many occasions and they will achieve huge things: fire their bosses, occupy their factories, and so on. We try to transform these committees into independent unions in the factory... If the leftists and the people succeed in creating these committees, it will be a precious instrument in winning the revolution.*¹⁸⁸⁴

Traditional intellectuals helped their organic counterparts in consolidating and institutionalizing their local strike committees “...with the lawyers that we have, with the people experienced in these fields...”¹⁸⁸⁵ into trade unions on the level of the workplace. This “horizontal” assistance was complemented with “vertical” instruction, as leftists supported the formation of trade union federations, connecting and coordinating isolated instances of class struggle with each other. With regard to HASHD and the RS, Gihan Ibrahim elucidated that:

What we are doing is expanding our work and continuing to do what we did already, which is being in urban poor areas, having close ties with workers within key factories, coordinating that very well, even though we are not many. We are not like 6 April who do have a large base number-wise, however we have, I think, an impact in places like Mahalla, like Suez, like Alexandria, like factories in

¹⁸⁸⁴ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁸⁸⁵ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

*Helwan... through our connections and web of coordination , we are able to connect all these movements to build a workers' force that we believe is the key in defending the revolution and in continuing the revolution and ultimately having the workers to be truly representative in whatever process may come.*¹⁸⁸⁶

Secondly, leftists encouraged a politicization of strike committees and trade unions, reinforcing the notion of workers as a political Subject. Strike committees and civil committees sometimes entwined and fused into committees for the defense of the revolution, as Wael Tawfiq remembered: *"In the Iron factory in Helwan we organized a committee to protect the revolution. We were the first ones to do so."*¹⁸⁸⁷

Many Princes

The 25 January Revolution had not destroyed *al-nazim*. Even though some pillars of State power were brought down, or weakened, others withstood the popular landslide. The throne of the Pharaoh was – temporarily? – occupied by the SCAF. Some leftists – a small minority – had illusions in the role of the Armed Forces. Most leftist militants, however, realized that the revolution was all but finished, and that the subaltern classes needed to form a counter-bloc. The revolution had not automatically solved the ideological and organizational cleavages within the Left. As I explained in *Chapter 19 Roads to Counter-Hegemony*, leftists differed in their political methodologies, which entailed, implicitly or explicitly: (1) a critique of Egypt's political economy and a proposal for a reconfiguration of base and superstructure relations; (2) a conception of the social force capable of challenging the neoliberal bloc and of its possible and necessary allies; (3) a strategy of dealing with State power; (4) a methodology of building a hegemonic apparatus. However, while these discussions remained largely academic before 2011, the revolution made their practical resolution actual and urgent. Simplifying the complex discussions, I suggest a classification of the various leftist Projects, based on their historical pre-revolutionary roots, into (1) a secular bloc; (2) a civil-democratic bloc; (3) a subaltern bloc.

The **secular bloc** had been completely – yet temporarily – subsumed under the revolutionary Project, which imposed an inclusive, popular Subjectivity –

¹⁸⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸⁷ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

expressed in slogans such as “Copts and Muslims: One Hand” – on any religious or sectarian Subjectivities of its participants. However, the rapprochement between the Brotherhood and the SCAF in the early days after the fall of Mubarak, the rise of the Salafists as a political movement, and especially the YES vote in the Constitutional Referendum, conjured anew the specter of an “Islamist” takeover. Especially those leftists from *Tagammu* or the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP) who were not engaged in grassroots revolutionary mobilizations and their neoformations, had placed their hopes in the SCAF-supervised “transition process”. Their dependence on either the new military Savior-Rulers, or “progressive” allies – such as the economically rightwing Free Egyptians Party of the “national capitalist” Naguib Sawiris – to fight off the danger of Islamism, expressed their lack of a real social base. During the November 2011 parliamentary elections they joined forces with the Free Egyptians Party, creating the Egyptian Bloc, with the explicit goal of defending secularism.¹⁸⁸⁸

The **civil-democratic bloc** shared the secular bloc’s emphasis on the creation of a civil state, but rather than *secularism*, the primary goal of the Project was *democracy*. The main danger for the Egyptian revolution was not Islamism, but the *feloul* – remnants of the “old regime” – and the military’s grip over politics. Moderate Islamist formations such as *al-Wasat* or individuals such as Abd al-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh were not excluded from the bloc. The immediate battle for hegemony was not seen as a struggle between subaltern and ruling classes, but between the military “State” and “civil society”. Sabry Zaky, for example, stressed that the transition to democracy was:

*...a long battle so we have to strengthen the political parties in Egypt. All political parties in Egypt are just carton parties, up until the revolution and today. So we have to have a long term objective, we have to strengthen civil society itself... and we have to have new political parties that are able to compete for power. This is the first step we ought to do right now.*¹⁸⁸⁹

The goal of leftists was to stimulate the creation of parties, organizations, grassroots committees, NGOs, trade unions, syndicates, of whatever class composition or political orientation, because the development and multiplication

¹⁸⁸⁸ Jadaliyya 2011.

¹⁸⁸⁹ Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.

of these organs would constitute a dynamic civil society that would act as a counterweight against the State – i.e. the military, the Interior Ministry, et cetera. Such an artificial separation between “State” and “civil society” was rather a liberal than a leftist conception. For leftists, it was also a variation on the stagist concept of “democracy first”: even though leftists differed from their rightist competitors because of their economic program, they should strive to implement democracy before engaging in any far-reaching social reforms. The civil-democratic Project easily found supporters among progressive liberals, parties such as al-Ghad and al-Gabha, al-Baradei supporters, middle class 6 April activists, human rights activists, et cetera. It appeared as the most inclusive bloc as it articulated the “dominant” democratic aspect of the 25 January Revolution, as Bamyeh explained:

...a striking development after January 28 was the fact that radical political demands were so elevated that that all other grievances—including those concerning dismal economic conditions—remained subordinate to them. The political demands were more clear than any other kinds of demands; everyone agreed on them; and everyone shared the assumption that all other problems could be negotiated better once one had a responsible political system in place...¹⁸⁹⁰

Originally, the Egyptian Bloc acted as the container for all civil-democratic forces in run-up to the 2011 parliamentary elections. However, liberal, leftist, nationalist and Islamist parties withdrew from the Bloc, either to join the Revolution Continues Alliance, or to contest the elections as independent parties. Even though (or because?) it represented the broadest revolutionary platform, the civil-democratic bloc was spread over various parties, movements, and electoral alliances.

A Subaltern Bloc

A Leftist Party

Some leftists argued that they should unite and differentiate themselves from rightist forces on the basis of their explicitly leftist project, formally expressed in its name, program and/or traditions. The relative freedom to create parties meant that the Left, for the first time since 1952, could openly establish itself as a

¹⁸⁹⁰ Bamyeh 2011.

socialist, social-democratic, or communist party. Inevitably, the revolution spawned a host of leftist groups, and some activists voiced the need for unity between the Left in *Tagammu*, the RS, the ECP, the SRC, Democratic Left, ESDP, et cetera. They perceived the fragmentation of the Left as the main obstacle for leftists to assist the revolutionary Project in its development: *“Most groups... are waiting for a big leftist party to join it and support it demands. We need a HUGE leftist organization to attract these groups and individuals.”*¹⁸⁹¹

Ironically, the project of an explicitly leftist platform encouraged both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Leftist actor Muhammad Zaky Murat remarked that: *“In my opinion, there is now a perfect atmosphere to create a truly leftist party in Egypt, but it is the Left itself that does not want it.”*¹⁸⁹² Leftists could only constitute a counterbalance against liberal, nationalist, Islamist, and military rightist forces by uniting themselves in a single fist. This perspective led to tactical discussions about the shape of Left unity. Should it be an alliance between different, existing leftist groups? Should it be a new, pluralist party with room for different platforms, factions and voices? Or should the Left simply join the formation with the most resources and authority? Posing these tactical questions already ripped the Left apart. No sizeable, organized group was willing to absorb their often slowly and painfully built apparatus into another party.

For example, at the beginning of March 2011 I was present during the debate in *Tagammu* whether the Left flank should remain in the party, or leave it in order to free itself from the bureaucracy and raise its socialist banner high. Haisam Hassan, a member of the UESY and of the left tendency, did not agree with leaving the party:

In this meeting they said: if Rifaat al-Said doesn't resign from the party, we will resign ourselves and make a new party. In my opinion, if you can't fix your home you cannot go out and make a new home and say: this is my new home. This is not right, you have to stay in Tagammu and prove that you are a leftist member and that you are a leader who is able to solve the problems. You cannot surrender with the first problem in the party. So we tried to tell them: please stay in the party...

I think there will be a new leftist party, but it won't be effective in the streets. I was talking to the financial chief editor in al-Ahali. We are making an edition about

¹⁸⁹¹ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹² Interview with Muhammad Zaky Murat, Cairo, 30 March 2011.

*this problem in the party and the question of a new party. And I see right now... my opinion is that all the left forces should come to Tagammu and be undivided to work in the elections of parliament and presidential elections; everyone, also the Revolutionary Socialists, if they make a party, maybe they will be effective with 100,000, and Tagammu too, and other parties too, but if they are one party with one program, one force, they can really do something in the elections and would have the numbers to have a lot of votes in the parliament and then we could agree to have one leftist candidate for the presidential elections. So it will not be effective, and it will not be a real party, but it will cause a lot of weakness for Tagammu.*¹⁸⁹³

Hassan's argument was straightforward: *Tagammu* was the historical pluralist party of the Left in Egypt; it belonged in principle to the rank-and-file; and leftist leaders should remain in the party and fight the bureaucracy to gain control over the apparatus's networks and resources. Leaving *Tagammu* would strengthen the bureaucratic leaders and cause a lot of damage to the Left in Egypt. The masses did not know all the exotic leftist groups that had sprung up since the 1990s, but they did have a collective memory of *Tagammu* – a memory that was materially entrenched in political spaces in the whole of Egypt as the party was still one of the few nationally organized leftist structures, with branches from Aswan to Alexandria.

For those who, in the end, left *Tagammu*, the argument was equally clear-cut. Firstly, why spend time and energy to fight an internal enemy when you could easily establish a democratic organization, reserving all political efforts and resources for the battle with the State? Secondly, while *Tagammu* had been the historical party of the Left in Egypt, it was also tainted with its past as the “legal left” and the legacy of the opportunistic secular alliance. Just as other “old” formations, such as the Brotherhood and the *Wafd*, *Tagammu* had never been a revolutionary party of the masses. Were it not for its disobedient and independent activists, *Tagammu* would have missed the boat of the 25 January protests completely. Muhammad Salah, a member of *Tagammu*'s Trend for Change who later joined the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, commented that:

Any leftist, any socialist, any communist, must bet on the people. Rifaat al-Said forgot that there are people in the streets. He only betted on his relation with the regime and he could continue his rule in the party through this relation. This is the clear reason of the current internal struggle, the political opposition between us

¹⁸⁹³ Interview with Haisam Hassan, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

*and dr. Rifaat al-Said. The revolution revealed the right opinions and statements.*¹⁸⁹⁴

The SPAP aimed to be a new “house of the Left”, but its leaders realized that it shouldn’t waste too much time on courting the various tendencies: “...*there are still a lot of leftist forces outside it, like Tagammu... like the Egyptian Communist Party, which treats Tagammu as its own party, and the Revolutionary Socialists, which established the Democratic Labor Party. We do our thing and we’ll see.*”¹⁸⁹⁵ The RS was skeptical about the collaborative Project of a unitary leftist party:

*The Socialist Popular Alliance Party wasn’t our initiative, but we participate in its meetings. However, collecting all the small leftist groups will not have the same impact of that of a good strong party. It is better to orient yourself directly towards the people than towards other parties. It is only when the Left is active in the streets that the new leftist leadership will become clear.*¹⁸⁹⁶

Gihan Shabeen of the SRC was of the same opinion:

*...we have to have priorities. We would love to connect to all these organizations. But we don’t have the time or the power to do this. If I choose, I choose to go to either that factory strike, or to that committee in that neighborhood...*¹⁸⁹⁷

Tagammu Trend for Change leader Muhammad Salah concurred:

*A socialist party should support the people in the streets. Its role in the society is related to its relation to the people. As long as it is a mass party with strong connections to the street and the people, it will play a big role. If this relation is severed it won’t play any role, especially in the Third World.*¹⁸⁹⁸

For most SPAP leaders and activists, leftist unity was a side quest.¹⁸⁹⁹ The real challenge was the construction of a revolutionary subaltern bloc against the

¹⁸⁹⁴ Interview with Muhammad Salah, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹⁵ Interview with Fatma Ramadan, Cairo, 15 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹⁶ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹⁷ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹⁸ Interview with Muhammad Salah, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

¹⁸⁹⁹ Because groups such as the Socialist Party of Egypt (SPE) and the RS resisted a merger into the SPAP, on 10 May 2011 the ECP, SPAP, RS, SPE, and WNDP, created the Coalition of Socialist Forces in order to reinforce leftist politics in the post-Mubarak hegemonic struggle. (Samak 2011) However, up until the moment of writing, nothing much concrete developed from this collaboration.

neoliberal passive revolution. Rather than “just” civil-democratic or leftist, the Subaltern Prince had to be *popular* and *revolutionary*.

Popular or Proletarian Prince?

Leftists who were engaged in the struggles of subaltern actors since the 1990s developed an integral concept of the revolution as a process of both political and economic struggle. Just as *al-nizam* did not only represent political dictatorship, but also economic exploitation, the social Subject of *al-sha'b* had a clear class dimension. Workers, farmers, impoverished urban professionals and students, slum dwellers, et cetera: these actors constituted “the people” in a “class sense”. The SPAP was established by SRC and ex-*Tagammu* members as an explicit instrument for the continuation of the “people’s” revolution. Gihan Shabeen explained that:

...we are not talking about a party in the sense of a tool to solve our own problems, but as a tool to continue the revolution, that those people have to have a political instrument to renew their struggle and to let them work together to transform them into the real beneficiaries of the process. Within this new spirit we try to create a new party, a broad leftist party, in the sense of a broad leftist party like in Europe or Brazil. We started already a month ago. Inside the revolution we had our first meetings. This party will be democratic and heterogeneous, people are allowed to create their own platforms. We are entering, as the SRC as a platform, not an ideological platform, but a political one. We have started working with this and I am hoping that it will become another power.¹⁹⁰⁰

Wael Tawfiq was in agreement:

In my opinion, the best way is a broad political party with a minimum of social demands and with a real popular membership. The social demands should be those from below, not imposed from a leftist leadership above. In time the best of all these organizations will rise to the surface. In the mean time, all leftists should try to organize the workers. The small groups will grow and create a bigger Left...¹⁹⁰¹

Note that this discussion reflected the pre-revolutionary debate between left-nationalists such as *al-Karama*, the SRC, and the RS on the role of the working class in a subaltern bloc.¹⁹⁰² For left-nationalists workers were an important

¹⁹⁰⁰ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰¹ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰² See *Chapter 19 Roads to Counter-Hegemony*.

participant in the national-popular bloc, but they were not differentiated as a class from other subaltern actors such as farmers. For them the emancipatory Subject *was* the national-popular bloc. They did not recognize a difference between, on the one hand, the conflict *between* the subaltern bloc and the ruling classes over State power, and, on the other, the struggle for hegemony *within* the subaltern bloc.

Even though both the SRC and the RS conceived of the worker Subject as the leading actor that could realize both political and human emancipation, i.e. socialism, they had a different view on the current ZPD of the workers' movement. The RS positioned itself firmly on the standpoint of the proletariat and stressed the historical necessity of the workers' politicization and independence: "*We want the workers, the true workers, represented and be part of the political process that they completely been out of for decades.*"¹⁹⁰³ As a leftist formation, their role was clear: "*We have to connect with the workers and we have to help the workers to build their party.*"¹⁹⁰⁴ In order to lead the subaltern bloc, the workers needed their own, independent structures. Mustafa Bassiouny emphasized that the goal of the RS was assisting the workers in creating their own party: "*We will help the workers in developing their own demands, which are not necessarily the demands of the RS.*"¹⁹⁰⁵ With the support of some of the leaders of the independent trade unions, the RS established the Workers National Democratic Party. The class character of the workers' party was more important than its revolutionary credentials or socialist demands. Saud Omar explained that:

*There should be a new labor party because the political parties should be rooted in social reality. A lot of leftists say that we need a new Egyptian Communist Party. I am not against this, of course. But I think that building a party on a class basis is more effective and powerful in society. Having a new labor party without any ideology, like communism or something, will grant it a larger influence than a communist labor party. It will allow the "bearded men" to join it, women, Christians, poor men, ... to join and become involved in this party, and all of the people here are asking a share in the wealth and power of Egypt.*¹⁹⁰⁶

¹⁹⁰³ Interview with Gihan Ibrahim, Cairo, 20 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰⁴ Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰⁵ Interview with Mustafa Bassiouny, Giza, 17 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰⁶ Interview with Saud Omar, Suez, 18 March 2011.

This line of thought was reminiscent of Trotsky's argument in favor of a proletarian organization:

*...of course, 95 percent of the population, if not 98 percent, is exploited by finance capital. But this exploitation is organized hierarchically: there are exploiters, there are subexploiters, sub-subexploiters, etc. Only thanks to this hierarchy do the superexploiters keep in subjection the majority of the nation. In order that the nation should indeed be able to reconstruct itself around a new class core, **it must be reconstructed ideologically and this can be achieved only if the proletariat does not dissolve itself into the "people," into the "nation," but on the contrary develops a program of its proletarian revolution and compels the petty bourgeoisie to choose between two regimes.***¹⁹⁰⁷

The subsumption of the worker Subject under the broad Project of the "people" obfuscated the fundamental conflict between labor and capital, and the task of overcoming capitalism as a concrete mode of production. The participation of leftists in the independent workers' Project would stimulate the formation of a philosophy of praxis: a methodology for the political and human emancipation of the proletariat and its subaltern allies.

However, for some leftists, the initiative of the WNDP came too soon in comparison with the actual developmental level of the workers' movement. Wael Tawfiq moved that: *"I think we should start from the base, from the unions. We should establish strong unions before a workers' party. Establishing a new workers' party now only brings about a new leadership.*"¹⁹⁰⁸ Gihan Shabeen explained that: *"It is not enough for workers to have a party calling itself the workers' party in order to join it. For example there is the Labor Party in England. The most important thing is to let the worker feel that the party is a real... alternative for change."*¹⁹⁰⁹ Ahmed al-Sayyid, the leader of the health technicians' union, was of the same opinion: *"First we have to make solid trade-unions, then we can have a party, but it takes a long time to create it. The ex-regime made fake parties, so people are not trusting the parties."*¹⁹¹⁰

The difference of opinion between the RS and the SRC on the necessity of either a workers' party or a national-popular party mainly concerned the "upper limit" of the proletarian ZPD. Whereas the SRC asserted that first the trade

¹⁹⁰⁷ Trotsky 1931 [MIA]. My emphasis.

¹⁹⁰⁸ Interview with Wael Tawfiq, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰⁹ Interview with Gihan Shabeen, Cairo, 16 March 2011.

¹⁹¹⁰ Interview with Ahmed al-Sayyid, Cairo, 21 March 2011.

unionist movement had to be developed before there could be any real, mass, organic workers' party, the RS believed in the proleptic role of a "high profile" proletarian party in the politicization of the workers' movement at large. These perspectives also reflected their diverging views on the "mode of movement" of the subaltern bloc in the post-Mubarak period. The "transitory" national-popular strategy of the SRC was based on the perspective of a gradual and protracted development of the revolutionary process, in which the workers had to wage a "war of position" to consolidate their trade unionist neoformations vis-à-vis the military and Islamist forces of the counter-revolution. Conversely, the strategy of the RS was much more oriented towards a "war of movement" of the working class, and a high tide of the Mass Strike.¹⁹¹¹ In this volatile SSoD, the workers' movement could become quickly politicized, if provided with an effective proleptic instruction that projected the proletariat as a hegemonic force.

Democratic or Social Revolution?

Stephen Maher claimed that: *"The Egyptian capitalist class and its international allies hope that by enacting mild political reforms, such as the freedom to organize political parties and speak more freely, the urban movement can be appeased and more radical social transformation and democratization forestalled."*¹⁹¹² In *Chapter 24 Workers and Revolution*, it became clear that the fates of democratic and economic transformation are entwined. The democratic revolution cannot succeed except by a reconfiguration of the economic structure, and the economic structure cannot be transformed unless the commanding heights of State power are captured and appropriated by a subaltern counter-bloc. This dual predicament is reflected in the twin histories of the civil-democratic and class movements that began from the 1990s onwards. It also renders the character of the 25 January Revolution as neither "democratic" nor "social": these are rather alternating moments within the broad revolutionary process; they are categories that subsume each other,

¹⁹¹¹ However, the strategy of the RS also continued to be determined by its leftist-Islamist alliance politics. For example, after the first round of the presidential elections of 2012, the RS called for a critical vote for Muhammad Morsy, the *Ikhwan* candidate, in opposition to Ahmed Shafiq, the candidate of the "regime". (Socialist Worker 2012) Moreover, they temporarily subsumed their proletarian perspective under: "...the widest possible struggle among the masses of our people against the candidate of the old regime." (Socialist Worker 2012) Also see *Chapter 13 Islamism in the Neoliberal Age*.

¹⁹¹² Maher 2011.

depending on which activity – street protests, strikes, elections, et cetera – leads the development of the popular Subject at a certain point in its trajectory.¹⁹¹³

In order to succeed, the subaltern forces have to overcome the sequence of particular perspectives that continuously refragment the popular Subject. This entails the building of a collaborative Project that allows each participating subaltern Subject – workers, farmers, students, women, et cetera – to recognize the realization of its own particular interests in the general goal that emerges from their shared activity. Such a Project also requires a concrete theory of itself as a collective actor, and of *al-nizam* as a historical bloc of political and economic relations – a theory that “...is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.”¹⁹¹⁴

Within the process of constituting a subaltern collaborative Project, the working class, as a social Subject in its own right, is able to play a central and leading part – not due to some mystic and innate quality as an abstract emancipatory historical force, but because of its real potential to become organized as a powerful social force through the Strike, as I have elaborated both theoretically and empirically in this dissertation. Even if in 2012 “...the working class does not have yet formal entities, organizations, parties, and unions that can claim their representation,”¹⁹¹⁵ the fledgling trade union movement is still the best organized subaltern actor, equipped with the formidable weapon of the strike. The consolidation, reinforcement, and politicization of these trade unions might be the best strategy for a Left seeking to assist the emancipation of *al-sha'b* from the neoliberal bloc: “The strikes are the only instrument that will make the revolution succeed, even the purely political demands.”¹⁹¹⁶ Conversely, the trade union movement could use the assistance of leftist activists and intellectuals to translate and defend its interests in the political sphere.

¹⁹¹³ See Kamal Fayumi in Mackell 2012b: 20-21.

¹⁹¹⁴ Lenin 1989: 11.

¹⁹¹⁵ Al-Hamalawy 2012.

¹⁹¹⁶ Interview with Muhammad Salah, Cairo, 7 March 2011.

EPILOGUE

The Prince and the Pharaoh

“Bildung” of the Egyptian Workers’ Movement

A conclusion is always an abstraction of the subject matter, but it is also a synthesis enriched with the concrete determinations of the phenomenon. In order to answer the research questions I advanced at the very beginning of the dissertation, I have constructed a concept of the historical trajectory of the Egyptian workers’ movements and “their” intellectuals. As a conceptual unit of analysis I took the workers’ collaborative Project of the Strike, from which new forms of social and political mediation were logically – in *Part I Methodology* – and historically – in the rest of the text – derived. The “speculative” development of the Strike was used as a framework of *expectations* to study the real, empirical unfolding of the historical process. This allowed me to discern proletarian lines of development that were strengthened, weakened, or blocked by the intervention of other actors. The *Bildung* of the Egyptian workers’ movement appears, on the one hand, as a diachronical yet non-linear story of interrupted trajectories, and, on the other, as a continuous (struggle against) the external colonization of its immanent class Subjectivities.

The diachronical story begins with the forceful introduction of the capitalist mode of production in the Egyptian social formation by the colonial State, cutting off any potential “indigenous” road to capitalist development. As I explained in *Colonialism*, the colonial intervention both stimulated and blocked the formation of a class of modern wage laborers, as both the urban “artisanat” and the rural feudalistic relations remained unchallenged by the few foreign capitalist industries and State sectors such as communication and transportation. The strikes in this period were rooted in both “traditional” and “modern” Subjectivities, and their hybrid character was expressed in the first trade union organizations such as the MTWU. Other strike neoformations were much more representative of an emerging class Subjectivity, such as the CTWU. The hybridity of the workers’ movement was further complicated by the nature of its antagonist. Despite its domestic agents, the “Pharaoh” was primarily a foreign actor, and capitalist exploitation was correspondingly understood as political domination. The concept that the the workers’ movement developed of its

predicament was a critique of colonialism and imperialism, and its negation was political sovereignty and independent economic development.

In *Neo-Colonialism*, it became clear that, for the workers' movement, the riddle of its exploitation was not simply solved by nationalism. Foreign domination continued, but it was complemented and complicated by the feeble attempts of domestic capitalists to carve out a niche for themselves in Egypt's industries. For the workers' movement this period represented an important developmental phase. Firstly, the absolute and relative number of wage laborers increased by the domestic industrialization efforts, and the military production of the Second World War. The saliency of modern wage labor differentiated the "wage laborer" conceptually from the artisan and other pre-capitalist types of laborers. In a way, the 1930s saw the consolidation of Egyptian wage laborers as a class-in-itself: i.e. as a potential social Subject subjected to the capitalist mode of production. The strikes in this period pushed its development as a class-for-itself. The trade unionist line of development – which had its roots in the colonial period, but only now became the central neoformation – gradually negated the economic-corporate predicament of the workers. Strikes challenged both foreign domination and capitalist exploitation. The colonization of trade union neoformations by non-proletarian Subjects was slowly overcome by independent trade unions led by workers themselves. Whilst the *Wafd* was able to subsume the trade union movement in the early 1920s, by the 1940s it could no longer simply dominate the expressions of the proletarian activity-system in the "economic" field. Politically, the worker Subject continued to identify itself with the nationalist Project. However, there was a reconfiguration of the relations of power within the counter-hegemonic bloc. By the early 1950s the workers' movement had become a leading Subject within the counter-bloc, supporting the nationalist Project on its own conditions. There was a – sometimes ambiguous and problematic – relation of exchange and solidarity between the worker Subject and other social forces. Arguably, at this point, the counter-hegemonic bloc was evolving into a real *collaborative* Project.

From a speculative point of view, if the counter-hegemonic bloc had succeeded in overthrowing the reactionary monarchy and British domination, the further maturation and differentiation of the worker Subject would increasingly have brought it into conflict with the class goal of capital accumulation and rent

accretion of its bourgeois allies. Furthermore, the inability of the illusive “national bourgeoisie” to develop the Egyptian economic structure independently from the rural feudalistic and foreign capitalist actors with whom its interests are entangled, opens up the political space for the workers’ movement to assert itself as a directive, i.e. hegemonic, force. In this manner, the Egyptian “distortion along nationalist lines” of the archetypical development of the worker Subject would, at the same time, become its organic solution: the subsumption of workers’ emancipation under the Project of nationalist emancipation would be reversed, and turned into the realization of nationalist sovereignty through proletarian hegemony.

However, the Gordian knot was forcefully resolved by the sword. The Nasserist Caesarist intervention aimed to solve the colonial question by the top-down construction of a nationalist Subject that fragmented and subsumed all other activity-systems in political and civil society. From the perspective of the maturation of the working class as a social Subject, this episode constituted a deeper developmental pathology than the “nationalist” distortion of the previous decades. Firstly, its independent trade unionist neoformations were subsumed under the State, losing their organicity as historical mediations of the Strike, and becoming the “practico-inert” objectifications of the working class. This did not mean that workers could no longer negotiate wages and working conditions through these structures: it signaled the end of these institutions as forces in the development of a proletarian Project. Most worker actions happened outside the framework of the GFETU. Secondly, the “octroyal socialism” and corporatism of the State transformed the existing and potential political-economic critique of property relations into a moral-economic consciousness of reciprocal rights and duties between workers and the Pharaoh. The dominant shape of the Strike – a brief “work-in” instead of a protracted “work stoppage” – generally prevented the organic development of new trade unionist neoformations. Nasserism then appears as the authoritarian and “peripheral” version of the Western Fordist consensus, and the bureaucratization of the trade union movement as the top-down reflection of the “organic” reformism of its European and American counterparts.

Similarly to the pact between Western capital, the State, and the working class, the Nasserist consensus could only endure as long as the ruling classes were able

and willing to share a sizeable fraction of the surplus with the subaltern classes. The global shift towards a neoliberal strategy for accumulation from the 1970s onwards, initiated a new line of development for the global workers' movement. In the Egyptian social formation, the neoliberal passive revolution was stalled by the contingent emergence of a rentier economy, which enabled the ruling classes to continue its "populist consumption policy" in a "post-populist" way: neoliberalism without a coherent or consolidated neoliberal strategy for accumulation. The GFETU was able to operate as the redistributive middle-man between workers and the State, deflecting major contradictions and their contestations. As such, the working class, despite a few militant strikes in the 1970s and 1980s, remained in its economic-corporate state.

The debt and financial crisis of the second half of the 1980s forced the ruling stratum to turn the passive revolution back to its offensive moment. The demise of State corporatism and the "moral economy" constituted a deepening of the workers' predicament. Their social situation of development consisted of the objective factor of the increased rate of exploitation, and the subjective element of their fragmentation and the practico-inert presence of the GFETU, which blocked the path of an organic trade unionist development. Although elements of historical Subjectness found their way into the strikes of the 1990s and 2000s – in the shape of elderly activists, organizations, texts, and memories – for the most part, the workers' movement had to reinvent and reinstruct itself as a social Subject. The Mahalla strikes constituted both the conceptual and historical "jump-start" of novel trade unionist neoformations and a new line of proletarian development. The protracted and militant work stoppages of the Mahalla workers inspired the tax collectors strikes, which led to the first independent trade union, and, in turn, stimulated the teachers, pensioners, and health technicians to form such structures of their own.

Within the SSoD of the Mubarak dictatorship, the trade unionist development was gradual and fragile. The 25 January Revolution and the disorganization of the State accelerated the formation of trade unionist structures and forms of consciousness. The future of trade unionism and worker emancipation is interwoven with the development of the revolutionary counter-bloc. If workers and other subaltern actors jointly participate in a genuine collaborative Project, the development of trade unionism is reinforced by political emancipation, and

political emancipation by the agency of a strong trade union movement. Within the instructive process of political emancipation and the maturation of its own trade union neoformations, the worker Subject may recognize the means of a universal, human emancipation in the development of its own, particular emancipation from capital. However, if workers and their potential subaltern allies fail to constitute such a Prince, their political Subjectivities will be either obliterated or colonized by a new Pharaoh, regardless of the faction – the military, USA imperialism, the *Ikhwan*, the “national bourgeoisie”, or the neoliberal capitalists – that dominates the ruling bloc.

The Road to Solidarity

Throughout its developmental trajectories, the Egyptian workers’ movement has enjoyed, as well as suffered, the intervention of non-proletarian actors in its activity-systems. Because of its salient class activities, the workers’ movement attracts the attention of other class forces, and of the intellectuals that have been organically produced alongside these classes. In Egypt, during the colonial and neocolonial episodes, the nationalist movement understood the potential of the workers as a social force – probably before the workers themselves. Actors such as the National Party assisted workers to set up their first “economic” structures – the MTWU, for example. However, they supported the workers in a colonizing way: instead of stimulating the organic and independent development of trade unions, they controlled and dominated these mediations. Conversely, the worker Subject recognized itself as a trade union Subject via the paternalist mediations of the nationalist movement.

After the First World War, there was a brief struggle between the *Wafd* and the fledgling communist movement over the trade union movement. The *Wafd* easily came out on top and subsumed the existing trade unions under its control by means of the GFLU. Again, the economic-corporate condition of the Egyptian workers was artificially transcended by the intervention of an external mediation. Both economically and politically workers recognized their interests through the *Wafd*. Between 1930 and 1935 Prince Halim took over the *Wafd*’s colonization of the trade unions, but his “Caesarist” NFTUE constituted a transition phase for the workers’ movement, as organic proletarian intellectuals began to replace the Wafdist non-proletarian leaders.

After Halim's fall, the *Wafd* could no longer colonize the trade unionist neoformations of the worker Subject. Workers no longer recognized their economic interests – i.e. themselves as a trade union Subject – through the mediation of the *Wafd*. However, they continued to identify themselves *politically* with the Wafdist Project. The shared activity between the workers' movement and the *Wafd* took on the dominant form of commodification: in exchange for economic concessions, the workers recognized the *Wafd* as the directive counter-hegemonic force. Meanwhile, other actors sought to intervene in the workers' movement – mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and the communists. The *Ikhwan*, however, did not court the industrial core of the new wage laborers, but rallied the embattled urban artisanat and the new “middle classes” that emerged in the wake of colonialism. The communists – and left-nationalists – for their part, supported the independent trade union movement in a solidary way. However, just as the Wafdists, they encouraged the workers to recognize their political interests through the mediation of a collaborative nationalist Project. Moreover, the national, political fight against imperialism took precedence over the “economic” struggle and the development of independent trade unionism. Communists engaged in a hybrid mode of assistance, in which political colonization remained the dominant form of support.

The confusion among leftists about the nature of Nasserism and their own liquidation as an organized tendency spelled the end of their support for the workers' movement. When they re-emerged in the 1970s, their mode of assistance remained largely entangled in the previous hybrid mode of assistance, calling on the workers to unite with a phantom progressive bourgeoisie. During the 1980s the leftist movement proved incapable of offering the workers' movement any coherent and centralized directive, cultural, or technical assistance, and it collapsed. Grassroots leftist activists and intellectuals continued to support the workers struggles in genuine and solidary ways, but were unwilling or unable to instruct the workers' movement as a potential social force.

From the 1990s onwards, a New Left re-engaged with street, community, and workplace politics. In the first years of the 21st century spontaneous grassroots civil-democratic activity-systems emerged and proliferated. However, it was the demise of the civil-democratic movement and the rise of the workers' movement in the mid-2000s that brought many non-proletarian actors “back to class”. I have

discussed the various types and modes of assistance towards the Mahalla strikes in detail and I won't retell those chapters here. Suffice to say that also for leftists it was tempting to treat the workers' movement in a colonizing or commodifying way: as a springboard for political emancipation, or as a shortcut to a mass leftist party. The defeat of the 6 April uprising in 2008 serves as an *exemplum* of the damage that some forms of assistance can cause to the workers' struggle. Nevertheless, thanks to the internal development of the worker Subject – e.g. the formation of the RETAU – and the proleptic and solidary assistance of some non-proletarian actors, the workers' movement gradually matured independent trade union neoformations.

The 25 January Revolution first subsumed the workers' movement under its grand construct of *al-sha'b*, but then the class differentiated itself from other actors by its strike activities: the best manner in which workers could assist the further development of the revolutionary Project was as an organized and militant social Subject. The Caesarist intervention of the SCAF ended the uprising, but not the revolution. Whereas the Republic of Tahrir was unable to expand itself to the whole Egyptian social formation, the seeds of trade unionism were relatively free to grow. The challenge for leftists is to see the means of their own emancipation in the building of the worker Subject – but according to its own tempo and needs. Assistance leads development, but only if its instruction does not move ahead or behind the ZPD of the workers' movement at a given moment in its trajectory. Despite the revolutionary character of the current period, trade unionism is still the leading neoformation of the working class. However, within the womb of revolution, the development of an independent, democratic, and militant trade union movement could swiftly mature into the formation of a proletarian Prince.

A CHAT with Gramsci

Immanent Agency

I hope that, for some of you, reading this dissertation has been like the experience of a trip to an unknown and slightly foreboding destination, only to be warmly welcomed by an enthusiast host. Eyebrows and suspicions were probably raised when Hegel and Vygotsky made their appearance. Was this going to be one of *those* narratives that proclaimed the triumphant march of the proletariat towards utopia? Wouldn't all this *spielerei* with obscure Soviet psychologists simply amount to a "psychologization" of "collective" social and political phenomena? The Scylla and Charybdis of Hegelian teleologism and psychological reductionism loomed over the text.

At the beginning of the dissertation I wrote that I wanted to contribute to the development of an emancipatory theory of the Subject. If we understand genuine emancipation as self-emancipation, then the means of emancipation must be found within the actor itself. Probably Marx's greatest *humanist* achievement was that he saw the ragtag industrial proletariat of his age not merely as a collection of dejected and tormented beings that had to be "saved" from the ills of capitalism, but as powerful saviors in their own right. Where the humanitarians only saw the *suffering* of the wretched of the earth, he saw their *agency* as the "gravediggers of capitalism". However, Marx never elaborated in detail the process of proletarian class formation or sociogenesis. Andy Blunden's non-teleological and emancipatory appropriation of Hegel – "reverse engineered" through Marx – pointed the way to an understanding of "Subjectness" that is dynamic, multidimensional, and, above all, immanent. Whereas a teleological approach enslaves the Subject to a fixed and external purpose, the concept of immanence places the development of goals and objectives in the agent's own hands.

Vygotsky's accomplishment was to render the philosophical concept of immanent development concrete – yet in the domain of ontogenesis. His revolutionary understanding of the social situation of development as a *predicament* that the child has to overcome by creating the necessary psychological functions, immediately drew my attention as a key insight. Obviously, as I stressed in *Part I Methodology*, his ontogenetic insights could not simply be transposed to the development of the workers' movement. At that moment I

decided that it was time to have a “CHAT” with Gramsci. The cross-fertilization between Gramsci and cultural historical activity theory – in particular Vygotsky – would solve, in one stroke, my two main methodological problems: the development of (1) a concept of “proletarian sociogenesis” as self-emancipation; and (2) an ethico-political understanding of genuine and productive non-proletarian assistance.

A Typology of Assistance

Whereas Vygotsky showed that ontogenetic development is always a development from a predicament, Gramsci explained that the general predicament of the working class is its “economic-corporate” condition. This fragmented state became the logical and historical starting point of my analysis of worker sociogenesis. The “classic” concept of the working class as a Subject-in-itself was grasped as a the specific activity-system of wage labor, produced by historical processes of proletarianization and capital accumulation. However, workers cannot find the means to emancipate themselves in the activity of wage labor – which is externally enforced upon them – but through the Strike. Vygotsky’s concepts of neoformations, lines of development, and leading activities elucidated the mechanisms behind the formation of a worker activity-system. By transposing Vygotsky’s insight of “ingrowth” to proletarian sociogenesis, it became clear that workers’ objectifications that emerge throughout the Strike activity not only constitute forms of mediation with factory management, capitalist owners, and /or the State, but that they also turn “inward”, developing the internal coherence of the fledgling proletarian Subject. If the Strike is allowed to develop – i.e. run its “logical” course – its horizontal and vertical expansion lead to “trade unionism”, which, in turn opens up avenues for political Subjectivities.¹⁹¹⁷

Vygotsky stressed that instruction must lead development – that it must be “proleptic”. Combined with Gramsci’s notions of “intellectuals” and “dialectical

¹⁹¹⁷ Of course, the real, historical development of “strikes” did not neatly follow the conceptual unfolding of the Strike – just as Marx’s description of the maturation of the commodity relation into the capital relation did not reflect the historical path of capitalism. In order to understand a phenomenon one cannot be content with just describing a sequence of events: scientific knowledge is the confrontation of the logical with the historical unfolding of a process. See *Part I Methodology*.

pedagogy”, this insight offered a framework to understand the mechanisms of both intra-class and inter-class assistance in development. Firstly, the concept of “intellectuals” engaged with the reality of the social division of labor, both within and without the worker Subject.

Secondly, the division between “organic” and “traditional” intellectuals made clear that: (1) the worker Subject was fully capable of producing its “own” intellectuals through the Strike; and (2) non-proletarian intellectuals could still play a role in proletarian sociogenesis.

Thirdly, Gramsci observed that intellectuals engaged in different types of activities – directive, cultural, and technical – which I connected with Vygotsky’s understanding of the role of “peers” and “teachers” in instruction. In order to productively assist a Subject in its development, instruction must imagine the Subject in a more advanced state of its potential trajectory. I mobilized Meshcheryakov’s ontogenetic distinction between “autoprolepsis” and “heterolepsis” for an understanding of intra-class and inter-class forms of proleptic instruction.

Fourthly, Vygotsky stressed that not all “imagination” were reasonable: despite the sometimes “punctuated” nature of ontogenetic development, the child’s ability to accelerate its learning through assistance is not absolute. Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development helped me to appreciate the “upper” and “lower” boundaries of assistance in proletarian sociogenesis. For example, the 6 April 2008 “general strike” clearly showed a transgression of the upper boundaries of the worker Subject’s potential development at that particular point in its trajectory. The ZPD offers a scientific understanding of the cliché – or is it a form of “good sense”? – among leftists that their instruction has to be always “one step ahead of the movement”.

Fifthly, with the history of leftist paternalism and substitutionalism in mind, there was clearly an ethico-political dimension to assistance. The hierarchical teacher-student relation could not be a model for a mode of assistance that stimulates self-emancipation. Gramsci’s concept of “dialectical pedagogy” tentatively pointed towards such a “deontology”. Blunden’s appropriation of Hegel’s “modes of recognition” suggested an ethico-political typology of assistance as either colonization, commodification, solidarity, and collaboration – the latter being the sublation of the “externality” of the assistant to the assisted.

Solidarity and collaboration offer a concrete way to overcome the dichotomy between the social division of labor and the principle of self-emancipation – the original problematic of this dissertation. It presents leftists with an ethico-political deontology of assistance that does not encroach on the autonomy of the worker Subject.

Lastly, through a combination of the Gramscian and Vygotskian notion of the interpenetration of the developmental lines of good sense / everyday concepts and philosophy of praxis / scientific concepts, the divide between “false consciousness” and “scientific socialism” could be overcome: the emergence of “critique” and “class consciousness” were situated firmly within a dialectical pedagogy.

The interdisciplinary encounter between Vygotsky and Gramsci might well be the single most important theoretical innovation of this dissertation. For researchers working in the CHAT tradition, my methodology shows how “their” concepts of activity, learning, and instruction can be applied to social and political movements without reducing sociogenesis to ontogenesis. Conversely, political scientists might appreciate the Vygotskian insights into the mechanisms of learning and instruction that operate within emancipatory movements. To leftist activists and critical thinkers it offers an ethico-political mode of assisting in the unfolding workers’ collaborative Project, and a conception of the social Subject that is neither fragmented nor authoritarian, but coherent and emancipatory.

A Self-Reflecting Note

Modes of Research

Instead of treating the problematic of this dissertation, worker emancipation, in a (neo)Kantian way – as a mere object of knowledge waiting to be disclosed by the external agency of the researcher – I aimed to present workers as a social Subject in the process of realizing its own emancipation: a subject matter that “comes alive”. The Substance of the “social sciences” is not composed of inanimate and inert objects, but of real, living human actors, their activities, and their forms of ideational and material mediation. Simply put: the Objects of social science are also Subjects in their own right.

Just as the workers’ movement was present at its own becoming – to paraphrase E.P. Thompson – the social scientist is present at the process of investigating and presenting “his” object of research. The relation between the social researcher and his subject matter is not one of “objectivity”, but of “subjectivity”: it constitutes a mediated relation between Subjects and, possibly, a shared system of activity. This means that, *from the perspective of the development of a subject matter as social Subject*, social scientists engage in forms of assistance as well. There is a clear ethico-political dimension to the study of emancipatory collaborative Projects, and now, at the end of this dissertation, the time has come to subjugate my own research activity to the deontology I developed.

In the context of the social sciences, **non-recognition** is simply the non-recognition of the subject matter as a (potential) social Subject. Workers are mere statistics, or the passive objects of economic and political processes. Conversely, the researcher does not recognize his own Subjectivity vis-à-vis his object of research. Workers do not interpellate him, and he does not interpellate the workers. I remember that, when I, as a teenager, first read the Communist Manifesto, I did not feel at all interpellated by the word *arbeiders* (workers) – which, in Dutch, has the automatic connotation of blue-collar workers. Why not just take “the people” as the emancipatory Subject? It took a while before I was able to recognize “workers” as a relevant, social force. This recognition was mediated by political writings and the direct perception of salient displays of agency: strikes and demonstrations. Now I take this immanent agency almost for granted, and I have to remind myself that this recognition has been a gradual

learning process itself. However, this personal experience has supported my understanding of Egyptian civil-democratic actors' slow and often reluctant recognition of the proletarian Project. Without a participation – via the mediation of newspapers, television, texts, stories, direct observation, collaboration, et cetera – in the Strike, recognition is impossible.

Colonization is the subsumption of a Subject under another Subject, and with regard to the activity of research this means the subjugation of a Subjectivity to another Project, reducing the Subject to a position of subalternity. It's easy to come up with extreme examples of colonizing science, such as the perspectives of the "white man's burden", modernization theory, orientalism, et cetera. However, colonization is much more pervasive and, perhaps, unavoidable than one would assume. The instrumentalization of certain Subjects in order to support others, is entangled with the politics of research itself, where social reality is not only represented, but also "refracted" – in Voloshinov's words – according to class and other Subjectivities. For example, my historical narrative of the Egyptian social formation was written from the perspective of the development of the workers' movement and it "colonized" other Subjectivities – gender, ethnicity, religion, et cetera – for its purpose. Moreover, the personal friendships and relations that I built through my fieldwork are suppressed in the text, or pragmatically mobilized to tell the story of the worker Subject.

The activity of academic research also renders **commodification** of the subject matter inevitable – up to a point. Operating within the field of academia, we not only recognize our Subjects as ends-in-themselves, but also as pragmatic means to end. Academic prestige and, basically, employment, are important driving forces behind our research, transforming Subjects into articles, books, and conferences – into commodities, which are exchanged for wages, scholarships, and personal status. It reminds me of Marx's observation that: *"The criminal produces not only crimes but also criminal law, and with this also the professor who gives lectures on criminal law and in addition to this the inevitable compendium in which this same professor throws his lectures onto the general market as 'commodities'."*¹⁹¹⁸

A purely commodifying attitude towards the object of research entails the mere extraction of valuable and relevant knowledge from Subjects, and the appreciation of these Subjects only on the basis of their being a resource for

¹⁹¹⁸ Marx and Engels 1988: 306.

research. My mode of research contained an unavoidable commodifying component, as the writing of this dissertation and not the support of the Egyptian leftists and workers was its formal end. Nevertheless, I aimed to integrate this necessary commodification into a broader shared activity of **solidarity**.

To the social scientist, the solidary mode of research is oriented towards the development of his subject matter into a social Subject. The researcher creates a shared system of activity between herself and the “subject matter” with the primary goal of reinforcing the agency of the Subject. This mode describes the “engaged” social science of the partisan researcher who is not afraid of “taking sides”. Obviously engaged science is not necessarily “emancipatory” or even relevant. For example, studying crime or racism does not require the researcher to be “in solidarity” with her subject matter – on the contrary: perhaps such studies deserve a healthy dose of colonization. However, the reverse holds true: research that aims to be emancipatory has to contain a strong dimension of solidarity, as this mode of assistance strengthens the capacity of a Subject to emancipate itself. An engaged researcher soon finds himself drawn into his subject matter, and has to make a choice between “keeping his distance” – i.e. minimize his participation in the shared activity-system – becoming a “fellow traveler” – i.e. become a genuine participant in an explicit shared system of solidarity – or fully merging with the collaborative Project – i.e becoming one of its “democratic philosophers”.

Solidarity in Practice

Due to my own political engagement I have accepted the interpellations by my subject matter and moved towards a clear and open position of solidarity. I like to think that my research, however modestly, has assisted and will assist Egyptian leftists and workers in their emancipatory struggle. Firstly, there have been the numerous informal discussions with some of my close respondents, such as Haisam Hassan and Wael Tawfiq, which constituted an important reciprocal learning process for all of us. Secondly, when I had the opportunity in the Belgian media to give an analysis of the Egyptian 25 January uprising, I aimed to tell a story that reinforced the perception of the events as an unfolding popular revolution and not as “chaos” or a potential Islamist take-over. Thirdly, when I returned to Egypt in March 2011, I brought with me solidarity declarations from the Belgian socialist public sector union, which I shared with leaders of the four

independent trade unions. Fourthly, I helped to set up a solidarity committee in Ghent with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Fifthly, I wrote two brief pieces for the youth organisation of *Tagammu* – one before and one after the revolution, voicing my opinions on the political tasks of leftists at the time. Sixthly, I helped some leftists in establishing contacts with international organizations and movements. Lastly, I hope that my dissertation can be of some assistance in the construction of a collaborative Project between leftists and workers, that focuses on the building of the trade union movement as the best guarantee for the continuation and deepening of the 25 January Revolution.

In conclusion, an emancipatory science does not stand “above” or “outside” its subject matter: it is an integral part of its development. Hassanein illustrated my own position as an engaged social scientist in a humorous cartoon that he drew for me, and which now serves as the back cover of this dissertation: the pen as the fuse that ignites the bomb of/beneath *al-nizam*. However, whereas a stance of “objectivity” is impossible and undesirable, solidary assistance requires a critical and self-reflecting attitude. If “trust” and “honesty” are pillars of the solidary mode of assistance, then the social scientist should secure this relationship from *both* his respondents and his academic audience. This approach ensures that, even though the ethico-political deontology of solidarity may be *subjective* and *partisan*, it remains *critical* and *scientific*.

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