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## Introduction: reading the revolutionary process in North Africa with Gramsci

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### ABSTRACT

This special section is based on part of the papers presented at the ‘Gramsci in the Arab World’ conference, held at the Università degli studi di Bari (Italy), in late 2017. Academic writings of Arab societies have been scarce and fragmented until the 1990s, when with the crisis of the Arab State and the end of the Cold War, Gramsci became one of the most cited European thinkers in the Arab region. Eventually, the ‘Gramscian moment’ in the MENA had a sudden ‘explosion’ at the time of the Arab Uprisings. Indeed, from 2011 onwards Arab and non Arab scholars have increasingly resorted to Gramsci’s analytical categories to read the ongoing revolutionary events. The rationale of this special section is to contribute to this debate, with a special focus on Egypt and Tunisia. Contextualized by an historical introductory article, the special section is composed of five contributions, analyzing the pre and post-2011 situation in Egypt and Tunisia, through a Gramscian lens.

**KEYWORDS** Gramsci; Arab Uprisings; Egypt; Tunisia; hegemony; subalternity

This special section is based on part of the papers presented at the ‘Gramsci in the Arab World’ conference, held at the Università degli Studi di Bari (Italy), 30 November – 1 December 2017, within the cultural and academic activities organised to mark the 80th anniversary of the death of Italian Marxist thinker and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937).<sup>1</sup> The conference, held only a few kilometres away from Turi, the prison where Gramsci began writing his *Notebooks* in 1929, is not an isolated event. Indeed, it is part of the growing interest towards Gramsci’s thought, especially after the Arab Uprisings of 2010–11, both in the academic field of North African and Middle Eastern Studies, and by scholars and intellectuals – as well as activists – in the region.

The extraordinary spread of Antonio Gramsci’s thought in the world in the second half of the twentieth century is a rather well-known issue in the field of political studies (See Filippini [2011] for instance). Within this ‘Gramscian

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wave', it is important to note the huge interest that Gramsci and his analytical categories aroused in non-European academic and political debates, beginning with South America. Indeed, the Argentinian Héctor P. Agósti (1951) was the first to introduce Gramsci's thought in political and academic debates in the Leftist circles of Latin America in the 1950s. Many intellectuals from the region followed in Agosti's footsteps, such as José María Aricó and his *Pasado y Presente* ('Past and Present') group, who read Gramsci in a Leninist-Guevarist spirit in the 1960s, or, more recently, the Brazilian Carlos Nelson Coutinho, who devoted part of his work to critically rethink Gramsci's political ideas ([1999] 2013).

The thought of the Italian theorist and revolutionary also notably facilitated the emergence of new fields, such as Cultural Studies and Post-colonial Studies, and inspired non-Western political and academic debates, namely the *Subaltern Studies* group, founded by Indian historian Ranajit Guha and others in 1981.<sup>2</sup>

Comparatively little is known about the development of the debate inspired by Gramsci in (and about) the Arab world, especially North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Academic readings of Arab societies in a Gramscian perspective, whether in European languages or in Arabic, have been rather scarce and fragmented until the 1990s, despite pioneering works by well-known scholars such as Anouar Abdel-Malek ([1970] 1983) on the making of contemporary Arabic political thought, Hisham Sharabi (1970) on the relations between Arab intellectuals and the 'West', Abdallah Laroui (1976) on the post-1967 crisis of Arab intellectuals, Tahar Labib (1981) on the lesson of Gramsci to overcome such a crisis, and Nazih Ayubi (1995) on the loss of hegemony of the post-colonial Arab State, just to name a few.

In the 1990s, with the crisis of the State in the Arab World (Ayubi 1995) and the end of the Cold War, Gramsci became one of the most cited European thinkers in the Arab region. Following this wave of interest, partly due to Gramsci's reputation as one of the most accomplished theoreticians of civil society, conferences as well as academic and political events were organised to deepen knowledge of the Sardinian revolutionary and to probe the applicability of his theories to contemporary Arab societies.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the 'Gramscian Moment' in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region had a sudden 'explosion' at the time of the Arab Uprisings. Indeed, from 2011 onwards Arab and non-Arab scholars have increasingly used Gramscian analytical perspectives and categories to read the revolutionary events, attempting to make sense of both the pre- and (often dramatic) post-revolutionary phases.<sup>5</sup>

The rationale of this special section – based on original research and on a scholarly collaboration going back to the abovementioned Bari conference – is to contribute to this ongoing debate, roughly ten years since the beginning of the Uprisings in North Africa, with a special focus on Egypt and Tunisia.

The *fil rouge* running throughout this special section is a 'Gramscian inspiration', which provides new epistemological tools to read the trajectories of the 'revolutionary processes' in contemporary North Africa, with the help of well-known Gramscian categories including hegemony, subalternity, passive Revolution, organic and traditional intellectuals, the 'Southern Question', and the Modern Prince.

We believe these categories are particularly appropriate to effectively analyse the events which unfolded in North Africa before, during, and after the Uprisings.

At the same time, the special section aims to locate recent debates within an intellectual and historical trajectory dating back to the late 1970s, when Gramsci's insights and reflections began to penetrate for the first time in some countries of the Arab World, Egypt and Tunisia first of all.

Contextualised by an historical introductory article, the special section is composed of five contributions, analysing the pre and post-2011 political evolution in Egypt and in Tunisia. The focus on Egypt and Tunisia is because both countries have been directly and dramatically involved in the post-2011 revolutionary process, albeit with a very different trajectory. Moreover, both Egypt and Tunisia have been, together with Lebanon, pioneer countries in the spread of knowledge and discussion of Gramscian thought in the Arab World since the 1970s. This special section highlights the deep influence of Gramsci on Egyptian and Tunisian scholars and intellectuals.

The special section's opening article by Patrizia Manduchi aptly reads recent upheavals as the apical moment of a long political, social and cultural crisis that originated in the 1970s in the Arab region, coinciding with the crisis of State legitimacy and indeed the process of disaffection towards the 'State' category itself, which had previously been absolutely dominant since the achievement of national independence throughout the region. The bitter disappointment caused by the failure of *étatist* and developmentalist policies pursued in the 1950s and 1960s, the de-legitimization of States which were increasingly losing consensus and were no longer able to exercise a Gramscian *hegemony*, and whose 'stability' was increasingly conditional on their coercive apparatuses, all contributed to the emergence of *civil society* as a fundamental social actor in Egypt and in Tunisia. If the Arab Uprisings laid bare the limits of neoliberal reform in the region (Teti and Gervasio 2011), this civil society, mainly composed of informal networks, has played a pivotal role in paving the way for the revolutions in North Africa.

The apparent break of the revolutionary tide in the region after the enthusiasm generated by the fall of 'presidents for life' Zine el-Abidine Ben 'Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011, drew attention to the dynamic of counter-revolution and regime restoration. In his contribution on Egypt, Brecht De Smet argues that such processes can be usefully analysed through Gramsci's concept of *passive revolution*. This Gramscian analytical

category is an historical 'criterion of interpretation', revealing the capacities of political elites to defeat popular initiative and restructure historical blocs from above. In this way, Egypt particularly serves as an example to understand the current phase of global capitalist restructuring and of regime resilience against the forces of change.

In their contribution, Gennaro Gervasio and Andrea Teti explore whether Egyptian Independent Civic Activists (ICAs) in the 2000s can be considered 'organic intellectuals', in Gramscian terms, in relation to the subaltern classes they intended to represent. This approach considers both the complexity of the relationship between ICAs and subaltern groups; makes it possible to assess whether these actors engage in counter-hegemonic resistance; and provides a framework within which the agency of these groups can be studied. While avoiding entirely structuralist or individualistic explanations, it is possible to acknowledge ICAs *active* role in paving the way to the Uprising.

A rather unusual approach to the use of Gramsci in the North African context is chosen by Fabio Merone in his article, looking at the Tunisian Islamist group *Ansar al-Sharia*, which emerged between 2011 and 2013. Calling into question the concept of *hegemony*, Merone's contribution sees in political Islam the role Gramsci intended for the Communist Party. A political party, for Gramsci, must play the role of a *modern prince*, to transform popular social groups into active agents of inclusion and transformation. In the case analysed in Merone's article, the revolutionary practice of a radical Islamist movement is studied by applying the Gramscian categories of *war of position*, *hegemony*, *revolution*.

The article by Baccar Gherib, which closes the special section, also focuses on the post-2011 'Tunisian transition', through the Gramscian concepts of *hegemony* and *passive revolution*, critically rethought. The author sees in these concepts the main framework to understand both contemporary and older events in Tunisia, that is both the building State under Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Ben 'Ali's post-populist regime (1987–2011). Gherib retraces the way Bourguiba succeeded in building hegemony, by showing how the postcolonial elites, through their alliance with the powerful UGTT (Tunisia's General Labour Union), secured the people's consent from below. Ben 'Ali, coming to power in a moment of political and economic crisis, lost the 'battle for hegemony', increasingly relying on repression and violence only. Gherib sees elements of continuity in post-2011 Tunisia as the ongoing crisis of hegemony, together with an 'upgraded' form of passive revolution has made the transition to democracy very problematic.

Since almost all Gramscian concepts are often contested, this special section does acknowledge the presence of multiple approaches to Gramsci. In the same way, the guest editors do not claim to have the last word on Gramscian analyses of the Arab Uprisings in North Africa. On the contrary,

we believe that the exploration of the theoretical opportunities offered by Gramsci's thought to the study of the region is only beginning.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. The conference was organised by Gennaro Gervasio, Patrizia Manduchi, and Alessandra Marchi in collaboration with the Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca per gli Studi Gramsciani, the Gramsci Foundation of Italy, the Gramscilab at the University of Cagliari, and the International Gramsci Society (IGS). Another part of the papers presented at the conference have been submitted for publication as a special issue of *Middle East Critique* titled 'Gramsci in the Middle East', edited by John Chalcraft and Alessandra Marchi.
2. For an introduction to this group, see Guha and Spivak (1988).
3. A notable exception is Manduchi, Marchi, and Vacca, eds (2017).
4. The papers of the two most important Arab conferences on Gramsci are in Rashid (1991) and Brondino and Labib (1994).
5. Among the most accomplished works produced in this new wave of Gramscian studies on the Region, see: Achcar (2016); Abdelrahman (2014); Bayat (2017); Chalcraft (2016); De Lellis (2018); De Smet (2015; 2016); Gherib (2017); Kandil (2011); Munif (2013), and Roccu (2013).
6. Following the international standard of Gramscian studies, articles in this special section cite Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* by providing both reference to the page (s) of the relevant English translation (when available), and to the Notebook ('Quaderno', Q) number, followed by the section symbol (§) to identify the paragraph number, from the Italian critical edition (Gramsci 1975).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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