# Revolutionary Weakness in Gramscian Perspective: the Arab Middle East and North Africa since 2011

John Chalcraft

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# Revolutionary Weakness in Gramscian Perspective: the Arab Middle East and North Africa since 2011

JOHN CHALCRAFT (iD)

London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE), London, UK

ABSTRACT: *This article sets out a Gramscian perspective on revolutionary weakness in the MENA. It aims not at a top-down analysis of how activists were crushed, but at a bottom-up analysis evaluating activist activity. Drawing on a reading of Gramsci, fieldwork in Egypt, and recent research on MENA protest, it adopts a Gramscian concept of transformative activity and applies it to the MENA since 2011. It argues that the basic elements of transformative activity in Gramsci include subaltern social groups, conceptions of the world, collective will, organisation, strategy/ tactics, and historical bloc. It argues that transformative activity involves the organic articulation of these distinct moments in a complex, differentiated unity. On the basis of this view, the article shows how sense can be made of revolutionary weakness in the MENA since 2011 through a critical analysis of problems in the organic articulation of revolutionary mobilisation.*

KEY WORDS: *Agency; Arab Spring; articulation; Gramsci; Middle East and North Africa; Organic; Popular politics; Praxis; Resistance; Revolution; Social movements; Transformative activity*

Just as Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the communist revolutionary and intellectual, confronted the failure of the revolution in Italy after 1920, so too, in the present, do activists and academics confront across an entire region the many failures and weaknesses of the 2011 revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In 2021, the popular slogan of 'bread, freedom, and social justice' has not been realised.[1] In this respect, Asef Bayat's important book on the uprisings of 2011, *Revolution without Revolutionaries*,[2] points away from top-down accounts emphasizing state power, the role of the military, rentierism, authoritarian 'learning,' party structures

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*Correspondence Address:* John Chalcraft, Government Department, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: J.t.chalcraft@lse.ac.uk

[1] Gilbert Achcar (2016) *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books).
[2] Asef Bayat (2017) *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

and/or developmental indicators.[3] Bayat, who draws inspiration from Gramsci, but also from his own experience and study of the Third World revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, does not look just at neoliberalism and regime power. Rather, his book is distinctive for its interrogation 'from below' of the weaknesses and problems of the revolutionaries themselves: Their lack of revolutionary vision, their weakness on socioeconomic questions, their leaderless forms of organization, their unpreparedness, their strategic deficits, and their failure to connect with a mass base.

Bayat's book is arguably the most important among a number of critical contributions to date on this theme,[4] analyses of which have many heavy stakes for activists. His book is also distinctive for *not* drawing on social movement studies,[5] the increasingly conventional source of theoretical inspiration for studies of protest in the Middle East and North Africa in general and the uprisings of 2011 in particular.[6]

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[3] For instance, Saïd Amir Arjomand (ed.) (2015) *The Arab Revolution of 2011: A Comparative Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press); Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud & Andrew Reynolds (2015) *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders (2014) Authoritarian Learning and Counter-Revolution, in Marc Lynch (ed.) *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 75-92.

[4] Maha Abdelrahman (2015) *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* (London: Routledge); Joel Beinin (2015) *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); John Chalcraft (2012) Horizontalism in the Egyptian Revolutionary Process, *Middle East Report and Information Project*, 262, pp. 6-11; John Chalcraft (2014) Egypt's 25 January Uprising, Hegemonic Contestation, and the Explosion of the Poor, in Fawaz Gerges ed. *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 155–179; John Chalcraft (2015) What Difference does Contestation Make? Agency and its Limits in the Arab Uprisings in *The Arab 'Revolutions' in Comparative Perspective, Contestation, Transformation and the Nature of the State*, Eberhard Kienle & Nadine Sika (eds.) (London: I. B. Tauris), pp. 65–94; John Chalcraft (2016) *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 514–521; Brecht de Smet (2014) *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt: Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books); Mona Khneisser (2018) The marketing of protest and antimonies of collective organization in Lebanon, *Critical Sociology,* pp. 1–22; Aziz Krichen (2018) *La Promesse du printemps* (Paris: Sorbonne); Hèla Yousfi (2017) *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: The Tunisian Case of UGTT* (London: Routledge).

[5] For a survey see Gemma Edwards (2014) *Social Movements and Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). For more recent 'strategic interaction perspectives' see James Jasper and Jan Willem Duyvendak (2015) *Players and Arenas: The Interactive Dynamics of Protest* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press).

[6] Joel Beinin & Frédéric Vairel (eds.) (2013) *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed.(Stanford: Stanford University Press); Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi (2017) Beyond Structure and Contingency: Toward an Interactionist and Sequential Approach to the 2011 Uprisings, *Middle East Critique*, 26:4, pp. 373–395; Donatella Della Porta (2016) *Where Did the Revolution Go? Contentious Politics and the Quality of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Jeroen Gunning & Ilan Zvi Baron (2013) *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution* (London: Hurst); Neil Ketchley (2017) *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Charles Kurzman (2012) The Arab Spring Uncoiled, in *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 17(4), pp. 377–390; Frédéric Volpi (2017) *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa* (London: Hurst); Frédéric Volpi & James Jasper (eds.) (2018) *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press); Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). An important work that does not draw on social movement studies is Charles Tripp (2013) *The Power and the People: paths of resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Taking its cue from Bayat, this article aims to develop a Gramscian account of transformative activity and to illustrate its application to revolutionary weakness in the MENA since 2011. The first part sets forth the building blocks of a critical Gramscian framework for studying and critiquing transformative activity. There is room in the literature here for a contribution, insofar as the meaning of transformative activity in the long, Gramscian tradition is not singular or uncontested. Moreover, the uses to which researchers, certainly in Middle East Studies, have put Gramsci's work often have shed more light on hegemony, passive revolution, political economy and elite activity than on popular struggle.[7] The second part of the article shows how a Gramscian critique of transformative activity can pose interesting questions and suggest useful hypotheses regarding revolutionary weaknesses since 2011.

The article is based on a recent, rich season of secondary research on MENA protest, fieldwork in Egypt between 2010 and 2014, and a primary reading of the existing English translations of Gramsci's writings. I have studied the pre-prison political and cultural writings, and the two volumes of selections from the prison notebooks.[8] Although the bibliography on Gramsci now involves thousands of articles and books, I have re-read a key selection of the most important English-language interpretations of Gramsci's work.[9] Inspirational have been major exponents of Gramscian approaches, such as Stuart Hall.[10] There is a growing literature in Middle East Studies that draws

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[7] Nazih A. Ayubi (1995) *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris); Eric Davis (2005) *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Yasser Munif (2013) The Arab Revolts: The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born, in *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:2, pp. 202–217; Yaseen Noorani (2010) *Culture and Hegemony in the Colonial Middle East* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Roberto Roccu (2012) Gramsci in Cairo: Neoliberal authoritarianism, passive revolution and failed hegemony in Egypt under Mubarak, 1991–2010, PhD dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science; and Cihan Tuğal (2009) *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

[8] Antonio Gramsci (1977) *Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)* Trans. John Mathews, ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart); Antonio Gramsci (1978) *Selections from Political Writings (1921-1926)* Trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence & Wishart); Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart); Antonio Gramsci (1995) *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Derek Boothman (London: Lawrence & Wishart).

[9] Perry Anderson (2017) *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Verso); John M. Cammett (1967) *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Joseph V. Femia (1987) *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Renate Holub (1992) *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge); Frank Rosengarten (2015) *The Revolutionary Marxism of Antonio Gramsci* (Chicago: Haymarket Books); John Sanbonmatsu (2004) *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject* (New York: Monthly Review Press); Anne Showstack Sassoon (1987) *Gramsci's Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson); Peter D. Thomas (2010) *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, Praxis* (Chicago: Haymarket Books); Peter D. Thomas (2013) Hegemony, Passive Revolution and the Modern Prince, in *Thesis Eleven*, 117, 1, pp. 20–39; and Peter D. Thomas (2018) Reverberations of the *Modern Prince:* from 'heroic fury' to 'living philology, 'in *Thesis Eleven*, 147 (1), pp. 76–88.

[10] Carl Boggs (1986) *Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press); Stuart Hall (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso); and Raymond Williams (1977) *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

on Gramsci to understand agency, popular culture and mobilisation.[11] Finally, the paper draws on the considerable richness in postcolonial, feminist, global justice, International Relations, radical democracy, queer, Subaltern Studies, and ecological Gramscian research.[12]

## Why Gramsci?

Why draw on Gramsci in a discussion of transformative activity? Gramsci is above all famous for his distinctive theory of hegemony. For generations of scholars, politicians and activists, Gramsci supplies a reason for the failure of the communist revolution. Far from drawing attention to questions of agency, it plausibly can be argued, Gramsci's analysis has directed us to study the enduring power of the bourgeois capitalist order, and the ability of the state, capital, and ruling groups to win the consent of the mass of the population, multiplying intermediary petty-bourgeois strata, diffusing

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[11] Maha Abdelrahman (2004) *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris); Asef Bayat (1997) Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamist Activism in Iran and Egypt, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40, 1 (Spring), pp. 136–169; John Chalcraft (2009) *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 9–13; John Chalcraft (2011) Labour Protest and Hegemony in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, in Sara Motta and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (eds.) *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 35-58; John Chalcraft (2012) Egypt's Uprising, Mohamed Bouazizi and the failure of neoliberalism, in *The Maghreb Review*, 37, Nos 3–4, pp. 195–214; Chalcraft, *Popular Politics;* John Chalcraft & Yaseen Noorani (2007) *Counterhegemony in the Colony and Postcolony* (London: Palgrave); Stephanie Cronin (ed.) (2008) *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge); Eric Davis (1994) History for the Many or History for the Few? The Historiography of the Iraqi Working Class, in Zachary Lockman (ed.) *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press); De Smet, *Dialectical Pedagogy*; Francesco De Lellis (2018) The Left and the Peasant Question in Egypt: Theoretical Thinking and Political Praxis, from Nasser's Agrarian Reforms to 2015, PhD dissertation, L'Orientale, Naples; Alia Mossallam (2013) Hikayat Sha'b: Stories of Peoplehood: Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956–1973, PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science; Sharri Plonski (2017) *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Power, Resistance and the Struggle for Space* (London: I.B. Tauris); Nicola Pratt (2005) Identity, Culture and Democratization: The Case of Egypt, in: *New Political Science*, 27:1, pp. 69–86; Rebecca L. Stein & Ted Swedenburg (2004) Popular Culture, Relational History, and the Question of Power in Palestine and Israel, in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 33, 4 (Summer), pp. 5–20.

[12] Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky & Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2013) *Marxism and Social Movements* (Leiden: Brill); William K. Carroll (ed.) (2010) *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press); Vinayak Chaturvedi (2000) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso); Laurence Cox & Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2014) *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism* (London: Pluto); Catherine Eschle & Bice Maiguashca (eds.) (2005) *Critical Theories, International Relations and 'the Anti-Globalisation Movement': The Politics of Global Resistance* (London: Routledge); Cristina Flesher Fominaya (2014) *Social Movements and Globalization: How Protests Occupations and Uprisings are Changing the World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Stephen Gill (2000) 'Towards a Post-Modern Prince? The Battle in Seattle as a Moment in the New Politics of Globalisation, in *Millennium*, 29, 1: pp. 131–40; Barry K. Gills (ed.) (2000) *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Richard Howson (2012) *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity* (London: Routledge); Alex Loftus (2015) Political Ecology as Praxis, in: T. Perrault, G. Bridge, & J. McCarthy (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, (London: Routledge); pp. 179–187; Sara Motta & Alf Gunvald Nilsen (eds.) (2011) *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Mark McNally & John Schwartzmantel (2009) *Gramsci and Global Politics: Hegemony and Resistance* (London: Routledge); Alf Gunvald Nilsen & Srila Roy (eds.) (2015) *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

bourgeois conceptions in civil society, buying off, co-opting, absorbing, diverting, and repressing revolutionary protest. Neo-Gramscian International Relations, indeed, often has focussed on the ways in which US global hegemony has been exerted not only through inter-state politics but through international institutions and neoliberal discourse – a far-cry from a focus on popular struggles.[13]

Yet, Gramsci's life was dedicated to, and literally given up for, communist revolution and proletarian struggle. He spent his life trying to answer Lenin's question: 'What is to be done?' His interrogation of hegemony was not simply to trace and exemplify the structural power of the system, but to find weak points, positions, and sites to capture and change. His interrogation of subalternity, by the same token, was not simply to trace the powers of hegemony written on the body, to diagnose power, nor to celebrate some authentic subaltern existence and immanent, unmediated resistance. Under-explored in the existing literature is the fact that Gramsci's pre-prison writings offer several explanations for communist revolutionary weakness in Italy that put the accent on revolutionary praxis rather than on bourgeois hegemony. He notes, for instance, in November 1923: '[T]he main reason for the defeat of the Italian revolutionary parties: not to have had an ideology; not to have disseminated it among the masses; not to have strengthened the consciousness of their militants with certitudes of a moral and psychological character. What wonder that some workers have become fascists?'[14] He also writes of the internal disunity and lack of initiative of the Italian Socialist Party itself at decisive moments, and of the failure of the communists to break earlier with the Italian Socialist Party.[15] Gramsci puts into question forms of praxis – historically-embedded conscious, collective, purposive activity challenging subordination and building new social relations in which subaltern status is ameliorated or eliminated and hegemony re-made. Gramsci's concept of praxis can help us think transformative activity in the present.

It is vital to understand that praxis in Gramsci addresses, challenges, confronts, and works changes on both hegemony and subalternity. Consider as an illustration of this, Gramsci's famous 1926 essay 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question', where a new meaning for the term 'hegemony' (*egemonia*) first is suggested in embryonic form. Gramsci argues that chauvinism and prejudice among the industrial proletariat of the North of Italy against the semi-colonial peasantry of the South of Italy is at once a result of bourgeois hegemony, i.e., bourgeois conceptions diffused in civil society and unconsciously absorbed by the proletariat. However, it is also, simultaneously, a figure that disables proletarian praxis, preventing alliances with the South. As such, it is an aspect and important feature of the subaltern status of the proletariat itself, an aspect which Gramsci and the Turin communists sought to overcome.[16] Subaltern social groups cannot acquire agency in Gramsci without altering both their own status and the terms and forms of the existing hegemony. Far from being a top-down thinker, Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' thinks subalternity, praxis, and hegemony together, in a complex, dialectically-related, differentiated unity.

Above all, it can be underlined that perhaps the most fundamental theoretical task for Gramsci was to synthesize the German and Italian idealist and sometimes

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[13] Robert Cox (1996) *Approaches to world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[14] Gramsci, *Political Writings (1921-1926),* pp. 171.
[15] Ibid, pp. 290, 417.
[16] Ibid, p. 444.

voluntarist tradition which he inherited, with the grand structuralism of historical materialism which he encountered amid political struggle. Gramsci's oeuvre is an extended struggle with the limits and possibilities of transformative activity, outside of the terms of classical Marxism, in which revolutionary 'agency' is ultimately determined in the last instance by the material workings of the capitalist mode of production. Gramsci, in the age of Lenin, broke with this scheme by writing into it the importance of consciousness and collective will. In this respect, the fact that Gramsci referred to Marxism in the Prison Notebooks as the 'philosophy of praxis' is significant. As is well known, the phrase was code for Marxism to avoid the prison censor. But it was also an indication of what Gramsci valued in Marxism, and a reflection of Gramsci's central concern with praxis (i.e., transformative activity) itself.[17] Marxists have criticized his lack of orthodoxy in this regard from the moment Gramsci first put pen to paper.[18] There is a good case, therefore, for suggesting that a key Gramscian contribution is precisely his grappling with the possibilities and limits of transformative activity. The question for Gramsci is, as Alf Nilsen and Laurence Cox put it, how do we 'make our own history.'[19] Reading Gramsci for an analysis of transformative activity, then is amply justified, in spite, and perhaps because of the fact that it has not necessarily been the lead note in the reception of his thought.

## Praxis and Organic Articulation

Praxis in Gramsci involves a conscious activity located among subaltern social groups,[20] entangled in complex and partially contradictory hegemonic structures.[21] Subaltern groups develop a critical consciousness, forge new conceptions and a new collective will, defining their own ends, demands, and purposes.[22] They get organised and determine through organization a line of collective action, strategies and tactics.[23] They become real and effective historical protagonists, active subjects who match means and ends, and forge alliances and links in a rising historical bloc, engaging contending forces. As Peter Thomas puts it: 'the people becomes the author of its own collective self-determination and self-reflection, 'leading itself' towards the sublation of the 'primordial fact of politics,' or the overcoming of the distinction between rulers and the ruled.'[24] The aim is to achieve a 'postsubaltern state.'[25]

Core components of praxis are illustrated vividly in Gramsci's writings on the factory occupations of August-September 1920, which Gramsci found enormously and enduringly inspiring. He writes that here, the workers 'can rely on no one but

[17] Schwartzmantel, *Gramsci and Global Politics,* p. 80.
[18] Palmiro Togliatti (1979) *On Gramsci and Other Writings,* Donald Sassoon (ed.) (London: Lawrence and Wishart), pp. 21-27.
[19] Laurence Cox & Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2014) *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism* (London: Pluto Press).
[20] For a sense of the diversity of this category, see Green, *Gramsci Cannot Speak,* p. 2.
[21] Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks,* p. 333.
[22] Ibid, pp. 130, 349.
[23] Ibid, pp. 194, 334–335; Gramsci, *Political Writings (1910-1920),* pp. 68, *Gramsci, Political Writings (1921-1926),* p. 93.
[24] Peter D. Thomas (2018) Reverberations of The Prince: From 'Heroic Fury' to 'Living Philology,' In *Thesis Eleven,* 147, no. 1 (August), p. 82.
[25] Marcus Green (2002) Gramsci Cannot Speak: Presentations and Interpretations of Gramsci's Concept of the Subaltern, in *Rethinking Marxism,* 14:3, pp. 1–24.

themselves. They must, therefore, develop their spirit of initiative: from a disciplined, industrial *object* they are becoming a responsible *subject*. They have to create for themselves a collective personality, a collective soul, a collective will [emphasis in original]'.[26] Gramsci writes of a 'process of inner liberation through which the worker is transformed from *executor* to *initiator*, from *mass* to *leader* and *guide*, from brawn to brain and purpose.'[27] Gramsci goes on: 'the worker … [amid party activity] "discovers" and "invents" original ways of living, collaborates "consciously" in the world's activity, thinks, foresees, becomes responsible, becomes an organizer rather than someone who is organized and feels he forms a vanguard that pushes ahead and draws the mass of the people after it.'[28] The Turin movement, Gramsci wrote later, 'gave the masses a "theoretical" consciousness of being creators of *historical* and institutional *values* [emphasis in the original].'[29] The development of transformative agency involves here a shift from a subaltern status of not being 'an historical person, a protagonist' to being 'responsible because it [the changed subaltern element] is no longer [only] resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative.'[30]

The word 'organic' appears very often in Gramsci's work, not just famously in connection with 'organic intellectuals,' but also with regard to the 'disorganic' expansion of a subaltern social group, organic conceptions of the world, the 'organism' of a movement organization, and the 'organic' formulation of strategies, tactics and bloc. The argument here is that this rich term contains Gramsci's critique of transformative activity. Above all, the term organic implies many subtle and complex inter-relations and inter-connections in the making of historical protagonism. We can speak usefully of 'articulation' – Gramsci himself uses the term occasionally – to identify the kinds of connections that are involved: Those that both link together and express a (potential) unity of non-identical elements.[31] Such differentiated elements include subalternity and leadership, the economic-corporate and the ethico-political, passionate feeling and abstract knowing, consciousness and practice, collective will and organization, spontaneity and planning, the vertical and the horizontal, centralization and autonomy, means and ends, superstructure and base, and theory and practice.

In Gramsci, real leadership, capable of imparting a direction and implanting new forms of order, has an organic formulation based on the many complex articulations of these differentiated and sometimes contradictory elements. An organically articulated struggle brings together consciousness and action where consciousness and action (mental and manual labour) have been put most acutely asunder (i.e., in subaltern social situations), and unifies theory and practice where contradictions between theory and practice are most violently enacted and experienced (i.e., in subaltern situations). It coordinates 'the diversity of experiences, interests and values of … [a] pluralised, pulverised and dispersed *popolo* into a … force'[32] capable of founding new social relations. Liberation is achieved when hegemony and praxis, theory and practice, become a single, living, differentiated unity.

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[26] Gramsci, *Political Writings (1910-1920),* p. 345.

[27] Ibid, p. 333.

[28] Idem.

[29] Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks,* p. 198.

[30] Ibid, pp. 336–337.

[31] Stuart Hall (1986) On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, in *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (June), 10, 2, pp. 45–60.

[32] Thomas, 'Heroic Fury', p. 86.

Two further points are noteworthy. First, historical protagonism is organic in the sense of being alive: It is not immanent in the structure or derived deterministically from it, but has generative powers, rooted in complex and even dramatic interactions with the environment. Second, organic articulation is a 'long labour,' a slow, fragile, 'molecular' growth, messy, non-immaculate, and subject to many setbacks. The appearance of transformative activity is not a matter of spontaneous, total rupture.

*Revolutionary Weakness since 2011*

The Gramscian concept of transformative activity arguably can help make sense of post-2011 revolutionary weakness. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the engagement and popular self-activity of subaltern social groups gave the uprisings of 2011 much of their transformative force.[33] By the same token, Gramscian optics would suggest that it was limits in point of organic articulation that account for weakness. Re-reading Gramsci on the 'crisis of authority' is powerfully evocative of Egyptian history post-2011. He writes that:

> *The crisis [of authority, and the popular uprising] creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population [those newly activated, including the petty bourgeoisie] are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm… . [while] [t]he traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it [the traditional ruling class] may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained.*[34]

There are many striking points of similarity between this general description and the course of change in Egypt, where ruling groups made sacrifices (by deposing the president), exposed themselves to uncertainty (by promising democracy) but retained power, re-organized and crushed their adversaries above all with a military coup in July 2013. The passage insists that fleeting, spontaneous anti-government sentiment is insufficient. The formation of new forms of collective will and historical bloc requires a long, popular labour and preparation, and a constant learning and deepening, including of the subaltern, cultural, organizational, and strategic variety.

A new conception of the world, organically articulated with the dilemmas, practices and desires of subaltern social groups, which could have laid the basis for a new kind of collective will and unified diverse constituencies, laying the basis for a new kind of political community – on the basis of a 'profound critique of *al-nizam* [the regime/political order]'[35] was not strongly articulated or broadly disseminated in the uprisings of 2011. Organic intellectuals of originality, stature and popularity – such as an Abdullah

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[33] See Chalcraft, *Popular Politics,* pp. 516–517.
[34] Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks,* pp. 210–211.
[35] De Smet, *Dialectical Pedagogy*, p. 381.

Öcalan or an Ali Shariati – were not strikingly prominent.[36] Wael Ghonim, the Google Executive and administrator of the popular website Kullina Khaled Said, who was briefly in front of cheering crowds in Egypt following release from prison during the 18 days, had sought consensus, aimed to avoid 'threatening' ideology and 'politics,' and used marketing techniques to determine what was and was not popular.[37] Activists do not appear to have gone as far as they might have in translating inspiring popular slogans into visions and programmes – with regard to the international situation, the state, political society, civil society, the economy, minorities, women, gender, and sexuality.[38]

In Egypt, there were acute limits on re-thinking the state. As Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouni put it: 'would the people remake the state in their image, or the state remake the people? The problem was that very few dared even to pose the question, let alone argue for a different kind of state, one capable of realising the demands of the January Revolution.'[39] In Egypt, the army enjoyed the trust of huge popular masses as a guardian of national honour and economic and political security: Only a thin layer of activism both before and after 2011 had mounted a thoroughgoing critique of what Abd Al-Malek once had criticized as Egypt's 'military society.'[40] Many believed that the Egyptian Armed Forces should be given a chance, at the very least, at the helm of the state. Wael Ghonim worked in the run up to 25 January to reassure would-be protestors that the Egyptian Army would be 'honorable.'[41] Even sophisticated, democratic and Left activists in Egypt sometimes struggled to articulate the words 'military coup' in the immediate aftermath of 3 July 2013. Many believed that the military could steer a democratic transition and return to barracks, or was required to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood, or to impose order generally. Indeed, for protestors in Egypt who waved flags, raised their heads as Egyptians, and experienced patriotic pride, the army's role as guardian of national honour even may have been reinforced by the 25 January uprising.[42] These, one might hypothesize, were limits on state-related intellectual labour and critical vision in Egypt.

Many activists appear to have accepted conventional liberal-democratic ideas about the importance of constitution-writing, presidential and parliamentary elections, multiparty competition, the rule of law, and human rights, and they expended much energy in vigorous debates on these issues, leaving alternate questions about popular mobilisation, and the deeper structures of gendered, state and economic power under-scrutinized. Radical democracy and horizontalism, for instance, as a programme was not

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[36] Although a number of important organic intellectuals were engaged, especially in Syria; see further Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2017) *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Hurst); and also De Smet, *Dialectical Pedagogy,* pp. 255–271.

[37] Wael Ghonim (2012) *Revolution 2.0* (London: Fourth Estate). Khneisser's 'Marketing of Protest' argues that marketing techniques and striving for consensus among activists in Lebanon in 2015 and since has diluted political radicalism.

[38] Cf, regarding Tunisia, Amin Allal & Vincent Geisser (eds.) (2018) *Une démocratisation au-dessus de tout soupçon?* [A democratization above all suspicion?] (Paris: CNRS Éditions).

[39] Anne Alexander & Mostafa Bassiouny (2014) *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution* (London: Zed Books), p. 321.

[40] Anwar Abdel-Malek (1968) *Egypt: Military society: The army regime, the left, and social change under Nasser* (New York: Vintage Books).

[41] Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0,* p. 140.

[42] Some activists were quick to register their critique of this kind of consciousness, see further Ahmad Shokr (2011) The 18 Days of Tahrir, *Middle East Report and Information Project,* vol. 258 (Spring), available online at: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258, accessed February 2, 2019.

widely-known, disseminated or appropriated among subaltern social groups, even when bottom up practices (in Popular Committees, independent trade unions, street occupations, alternative cultural spaces, direct democracy in workplaces, and *tathir* – the eviction ('cleansing') of corrupt elements from workplaces and other institutions)[43] resembled horizontalism.[44] In Egypt, some activists accepted what Bayat calls a 'neoliberal normativity' dividing political from economic demands, prioritizing the former, and allowing the latter to be depicted as 'sectoral,' non-national, and self-interested. In Egypt, critical socioeconomic analysis was not central to civil-democratic thinking and organizing. Conversely, demands made by striking workers did not usually go far beyond the economic-corporate into the terrain of the ethico-political.[45] Revolutionary activism did not necessarily challenge existing gender norms: Pratt argues that revolutionary protest against Mubarak involved a politics of masculinist restoration on the one hand, and a re-inscription of dominant norms of female respectability on the other.[46]

   In Egypt and beyond, only a few activists developed new visions of the regional, international or transnational situation. It has been argued, indeed, that strategic framing by Libyan activists designed to appeal to the West and bring about 'intervention' foreclosed the development of richer and more meaningful understandings, and in part failed to get beyond Colonel Gaddafi's definitions of power and collectivity.[47] In this way the development of new conceptions which could have laid the basis for new forms of solidarity, collective will, purpose and practice, whether in Libya or transnationally, was limited, paving the way for the fragmentation of the opposition. In contrast to Egypt after 1952 or Iran after 1979, few in Tunisia in 2011 appear to have engaged seriously with the theory and practice of exporting the revolution beyond national borders. Instead a resolutely domestic and national focus and imaginary was maintained. Bahraini activists, it has been argued, are increasingly discovering the limits imposed by the apolitical *doxa* of the international human rights field.[48] Such a critical consciousness, however, is highly uneven among activists in the MENA overall, where human rights languages can dominate consciousness, crowding out critical thinking about the meaning and causes of oppression and liberation, and about questions of popular self-activity and transformation.[49]

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[43] Alexander & Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 216, 291–292, 297–300, 325.

[44] Chalcraft, 'Horizontalism'; Alia Mossallam (2012) Hadheehee Al Araadey muharara: 'These are liberated territories': Everyday resistance in Egypt; dismantling state power, experimenting with alternatives and the growing movement from 2000-2010, in Larbi Sadiki (ed.) *Democratic Transition in the Middle East: Unmaking Power* (London: Routledge).

[45] Christopher Barrie & Neil Ketchley (2018) Opportunity without organization: Labor mobilization in Egypt after the 25th January revolution, in: *Mobilization*, 23(2), pp. 182–186.

[46] Nicola Pratt (2018) Gender, Popular Culture, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt, BRISMES Paper, (27 June).

[47] Kawther Nuri Alfasi (2018) Political Agency and the Symbolic Legacy of Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Libya. PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, UK.

[48] Kavan Bhatia (2018) Social Movements in Authoritarian States: An analysis of the human rights movement in Bahrain. PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, UK.

[49] Nicola Perugini & Neve Gordon (2015) *The Human Right to Dominate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Such languages impose a certain liberal grammar, foreclosing radical alternatives, part of Lila Abu-Lughod's critique in (2013) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

In terms of organization, strengths in criticizing older modes of organizing were not necessarily matched by strengths in the development of new vehicles or 'platforms.'[50] Doubts have been cast on the existence of sustained attempts to institutionalize Egypt's 'democracy of the streets.'[51] Certain activists may have had too much faith in internet and social media organizing, which 'may have put governments on the defensive,' and brought news ways of doing communication in politics, but have not diminished regimes' 'determination to fight back' using all means, and are 'far from profoundly altering societal dynamics or irremediably reconfiguring political power.'[52] Ghonim made sure not to associate himself with 'an organization, political party, or movement of any kind' as he thought that Egyptians would be scared off by any such discrediting affiliation.[53] He himself was not an organization builder, and made a rapid exit from the field of popular struggle. Unlike in Tunisia, the key statist union in Egypt, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), had no desire to break with the regime and join striking workers.[54] In Morocco, a more pluralist union structure faced only limited pressure from below and sided with a shallow process of palace-led constitutional reform.[55] Labour strikes in Egypt remained largely uncoordinated above the level of particular plants, professions or sectors.[56] The rapid multiplication of the urban workers' independent trade unions in Egypt after 2011 was no guarantee against state co-optation after 2013, and left these organizations potentially hollow, with the important challenge of 'educating a generation of activists in skills such as collective bargaining and union management.'[57] Francesco De Lellis argues that the main trend in peasant solidarity activism in Egypt involved legalistic, paternalistic, trade union bureaucracy-building, a process which privileged organization over support for grassroots mobilization and left such new unions distant from their mass base and vulnerable to state co-optation after 2013.[58]

A Gramscian optic does not involve a dismissive, modernist and Vanguardist rejection of horizontal styles of organizing. Laleh Khalili rightly has argued that 'authoritative exertion' can fragment as well as build solidarity.[59] The history of Left Vanguardism in the region, its economism, bureaucratization, sectarianism, authoritarianism and statism weighs heavily on the present.[60] A Gramscian perspective does not necessarily measure agency in terms of a yearning for a new, all-seeing, exclusionary

[50] Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution*.

[51] Alexander, 'Bread, Dignity', p. 325.

[52] Mohamed Zayani (2015) *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 11.

[53] Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, p. 61.

[54] Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*; and Dina Bishara (2018) *Contesting Authoritarianism: Labor Challenges to the State in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[55] Feltrin, Between the Hammer and the Anvil, pp. 28, 190–219.

[56] Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*; Joel Beinin & Marie Duboc (2013) A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004–2009, in Beinin & Vairel (eds.), *Social Movements and Contestation,* pp. 205–227; and Barrie and Ketchley, Opportunity without organization, pp. 182–186.

[57] Bishara, *Contesting Authoritarianism,* pp. 145, 153.

[58] Francesco De Lellis (2018) The Left and the Peasant Question in Egypt: Theoretical Thinking and Political Praxis, from Nasser's Agrarian Reforms to 2015, PhD dissertation, L'Orientale, Naples, pp. 176–202.

[59] Laleh Khalili (2007) 'Standing with My Brother': Hizbullah, Palestinians, and the Limits of Solidarity,' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49, 2 (Apr.), pp. 276–303.

[60] Chalcraft, *Popular Politics,* pp. 388–392.

Modern Prince seizing state power and imposing a new order. More important is a perspective informed by Stephen Gill's 'post-modern Prince,' a form of historical protagonism that develops on the basis of a long search for unity amid diversity organically rooted in the struggles and learning of subaltern social groups, a vision in which state power is in any case only an 'outer ditch' (and not the end point) of the long war of attrition through which a new social order is built.[61]

Purely horizontal organizing, however, is insufficient. It is constrained and limited by not confessing to its inevitable, vertical aspects. Such organizing must be embedded in the histories and consciousness of subaltern social groups, not assumed to be immanently and universally present; it must confess to having a specific, substantive conception of the world, linked to a long, contested discursive tradition.[62] Organizing must involve a collective personality, a collective soul, and a collective will, and thus engage in forceful contests. It cannot be reduced to the tiring vacuity of mere procedure and facilitation (bureaucratization in another guise) on the one side, or a free-for-all by unmarked, autonomous, expressive individuals on the other side. Issues of internal movement leadership, including issues of gender, sexuality and class, and external issues of alliance and bloc formation cannot be set to one side. And finally, horizontalism must envisage developing a deeper program and strategy, including the capacity for rapid and effective action amid changing exigencies. If horizontalism could be re-articulated in this way, as confederal democratic autonomy, for instance, then arguably its transformative potential would be enhanced.

As for strategy and tactics, a Gramscian is bound to ask whether there was a strategic vision on a broad scale for disarticulating the hegemony and 'discipline' of the dominant bloc and bringing about a new order.[63] One of Maha Abdelrahman's key arguments is that activists were unprepared for the revolutionary situation and had not formulated any plan for the seizure and/or the transformation of political power.[64] They were wrong-footed by the rapid fall of the dictator. Brecht De Smet has analysed the ways that strategies related to people power were unable to engage in a forceful assault on the strategic centres of state power during the uprising, and were vulnerable to military Caesarism.[65] Activists had many tactics, as Bayat puts it, but fewer strategic visions. The slogan 'the army and the people are one hand' may have been a clever, dynamic, micro-tactic during the uprising, but it was a trap in a larger strategy of transformation, as it helped propel the army to power while reinforcing its already immense popularity.[66] If *silmiyya* [peaceful protest] was emphatically a conscious tactic of the educated youth, the vital physical confrontation by the poor against the police and state institutions, was often downplayed, unanticipated, and not theorized as integral to the subjectivity and strategy of the revolution by many more 'respectable' actors, who often thought in terms of civil resistance repertoires and legal and NGO-based action. Further, the Syrian National Coalition strategy of seeking Western

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[61] Anderson, *Antimonies of Gramsci*, pp. 16-25; and Gill, 'Postmodern Prince?'

[62] See for instance, Barbara Epstein (1991) *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent direct action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

[63] That is, for 'disaggregating the alliances which enable them [specialists in repressive coercion, along with senior executives, political leaders, major media editors and so on] to effectively deploy coercion.' Quoted in Cox and Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History,* p. x.

[64] Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution.*

[65] De Smet, *Dialectical Pedagogy,* pp. 352–361.

[66] Ketchley recognizes this point, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution,* p. 157.

intervention has been criticized.[67] In Gramscian optics, this strategy is based on the unlikely presupposition that salvation will be delivered from on high.

There is plenty of evidence, finally, with regard to the ways in which the unity in diversity of the revolutionary bloc was lost over time or fragile and superficial at the outset. Divisions opened up rapidly in Egypt through street confrontations between middle class radical feminist organizing and masculinist and heteronormative subaltern social groups.[68] Feminist and queer activism also confronted a well-resourced corporate-sponsored, state-controlled, UN-linked gender and human rights machinery which was capable of drawing in and co-opting 'civil society' activists seeking stable career positions.[69] Anti-Copt sectarianism re-asserted itself in ways debilitating for unity as early as October 2011, for example, when the bloody repression by security forces of a mixed Copt/Muslim demonstration was characterized in state media as Copts attacking 'our patriotic brothers' in law enforcement.[70] Muslim Brotherhood constituencies drew back from street protest, 'eschewed mass mobilization and a more broadly coalitional approach'[71] advocated neoliberal economics, soft-pedalled on prosecuting the police, and pinned their hopes on a place in the state alongside the military.[72] Internet organizing, further, was no panacea against exclusions of class and gender.[73] Indeed, Mohamed Zayani ends his major study of 'digital contention' in Tunisia by warning against the danger that cyber-activists will distance themselves from 'the concerns of ordinary people.'[74]

As for the poor, anti-government sentiments could indeed be fleeting when protest against corruption, as in Egypt, did not pay dividends on jobs, wealth redistribution, and security.[75] In Tunisia, the new dispensation involved failures on issues of social justice, dropping or ignoring the social and economic demands of precarious, industrial, or public sector workers, the peripheral regions, the unemployed, and the grassroots of the UGTT, a powerful vector of division and exclusion.[76] In Morocco, the 'mobilisations remained fragmented, as the protests of precarious and secure workers did not merge with the M20Fev [movement]'.[77] De Lellis has argued that certain middle class activists had closer ties in Egypt to peasant constituencies than Bayat would have us believe,[78] but for both authors, this question is rightly central. Village

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[67] Jasmine Gani (2015) Contentious Politics and the Syrian Crisis: Internationalization and Militarization of the Conflict, in Fawwaz Gerges (ed.), *Contentious Politics,* pp. 127–154.

[68] Marta Agosti Pinilla (2019) 'The Female Protestor: Sexual violence and the making and unmaking of the state in Egypt post January 25, 2011,' PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Magdalena C. Delgado (2015) Contentious Copts: The Emergence Success and Decline of the Maspero Youth Movement in Egypt, in Gerges (ed.), *Contentious Politics,* pp. 259–280.

[71] Ketchley, *Time of Revolution,* pp. 100–101.

[72] Alexander, 'Bread, Dignity', pp. 216, 291–292, 297–300, 325.

[73] Shakuntala Banaji & Cristina Moreno Almeida (2017) From Passion to Activism?: The Politics, Communications and Creativity of Participatory Networks in the MENA Region, Paper, *LSE Middle East Centre* (June).

[74] Zayani, *Digital Contention,* p. 202.

[75] Andrea Teti, Pamela Abbott & Francesco Cavatorta (2018) *The Arab Uprisings in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia Social, Political and Economic Transformations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

[76] Lorenzo Feltrin (2018) Between the Hammer and the Anvil: The Trade Unions and the 2011 Arab Uprisings in Morocco and Tunisia, PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, UK; and Allal, *Une démocratisation.*

[77] Feltrin, *Hammer and the Anvil*, p. 28.

[78] De Lellis, *The Peasant Question.*

communities, even while making forceful social and economic demands, believed that what they were doing was not political and had no similarity to or connection with urban, middle class activism.[79] On the basis of fieldwork carried out in 2014 and 2015 in Upper Egypt, Laveille found that 'farmers, young unemployed, drivers, petty merchants, or public sector temporary workers', who 'viewed themselves as the poorest segment of society because of their low level of education, lower social status or professional precariousness' looked askance at protests by industrial workers or public sector professionals (such as doctors or teachers). Her respondents 'could not support the claims for better wages or improved working conditions of people they saw much better off, including doctors, lawyers, teachers, other civil servants, and sometimes industrial workers. The latter, at least, had a job.' Laveille notes that she found 'no evidence of attempts by contentious workers to mobilise support beyond their profession or sector … . a serious limit to the labour movement in Egypt in general.'[80] These forms of division and segmentation are conceived here as limits on the organic articulation of struggles and thus on the transformative capacity of the revolutionary bloc.

In sum, a Gramscian perspective suggests that deficits with regard to the organic articulation of the uprisings were important in limiting their transformative capacities. Further research significantly would enrich this topic, posing more detailed and diverse questions, confirming, denying or tweaking some of the hypotheses mentioned above, developing a more systematically prioritized account, and filling out historical and hegemonic contexts and dynamics.

## Conclusion

This article offers a Gramscian perspective on revolutionary weakness in the MENA since 2011. Drawing on an in-depth reading of Gramsci, it argues that the basic elements of transformative activity in Gramsci include subaltern social groups, conceptions of the world, collective will, organisation, strategy/tactics, and historical bloc, and that the concept of 'organic articulation' provides a ground for a critique of how these elements link together. Drawing on a rich round of recent research, the article shows how a Gramscian approach can make sense of revolutionary weakness. It enables us to see the short-run dangers of the popular uprising, without in any way dismissing the latter as chaos and violence. It draws attention to the under-development of new economic, political, international, cultural and gender-related conceptions of the world, the thinness of their appropriation among subaltern social groups, and the corresponding fragility of new forms of collective will, purpose, and desire. It emphasizes the dangers of eschewing organization, and underlines limits on much activist strategic vision. It points to the weaknesses stemming from division and segmentation within the revolutionary bloc, especially with regard to the articulation of subaltern social groups and leaderships. Overall, it parses revolutionary weakness in terms of deficiencies in the organic articulation of revolutionary mobilisation. It suggests that

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[79] Hebatallah Khalil (2017) Revolution in Parallel Times: An Ethnography of an Egyptian Village in Flux, Paper Presentation, MESA Conference (21 November).

[80] Yasmine Laveille (2016) Contestation in Marginalised Spaces: Dynamics of Popular Mobilisation and Demobilisation in Upper Egypt Since 25 January 2011, PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, pp. 227-230.

these limits can help account 'from below' for why mass mobilisation in the name of bread, dignity and social justice was unable to re-make fundamentally the terms of existing hegemony. The article offers support for many of the arguments made by authors such as Asef Bayat and Maha Abdelrahman, while contributing a systematic attempt to link such arguments to a Gramscian perspective.

Overall, it is hoped that this contribution will draw researchers toward the range and power of Gramscian approaches, chip away at the hegemony of conventional social movement studies, add theoretical detail to the historical and political analyses of Gramscians working on North Africa and South West Asia, and serve to stimulate further critical research about transformative activity in Middle East Studies, bolstering in the process the long and difficult process of revolutionary learning.

## Disclosure statement

## ORCID

John Chalcraft ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0302-9306

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