Egypt's 2011 Uprising, Subaltern Cultural Politics, and Revolutionary Weakness

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Abstract

Explanations for the weakness and failure of the uprisings in the Arab world of 2011 range from the hard-power and structure-centred accounts of conventional political science to interactionist studies emphasizing micro-dynamics and relational mechanisms. Drawing on Gramscian perspectives, and fieldwork in Egypt, this article aims to open up an occluded line of investigation into the subaltern cultural politics of the uprising in Egypt as a way to make sense of revolutionary weaknesses and limits. While critical researchers have studied the political economy of the revolutionary process and the counter-revolution, considered activist organizational and strategic deficits, and studied the limits on the political vision of middle class revolutionaries, less attention has been paid to subaltern cultural politics. This article argues that the study of popular good sense against the regime and common sense supporting the army can help explain revolutionary weakness in Egypt during 2011-13.

'[C]hanges in ways of thinking, in beliefs, in opinions do not occur through rapid, simultaneous and generalized [political] 'explosions'. . . . [which should not be] confused with cultural transformations, which are slow and gradual.' Antonio Gramsci (1985: 419).

Introduction

Few dispute that the popular uprisings of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa have largely failed to bring about revolutionary transformation (Achcar 2016). Explanations for weakness and failure range from the hard-power and structure-centred accounts of conventional political science (Brownlee et al. 2015) to interactionist studies emphasizing micro-dynamics and relational mechanisms (Della Porta 2016). This article draws on Gramscian perspectives in order to open up the investigation of subaltern cultural politics as a way to make sense of the course and consequences of the popular uprising in Egypt. While critical researchers have studied the political economy of the revolutionary process and the counter-revolution, considered activists' organizational and strategic deficits, and studied the

limits on the political vision of middle class revolutionaries, less attention has been paid to subaltern common sense and popular culture.

Occluding Subaltern Cultural Politics

Conventional accounts of the popular uprising in Egypt tend to underplay the importance of subaltern cultural politics – common and good sense, conceptions of the world, and forms of collective will operative among subaltern social groups (Hall 1988: 8-11). This point applies, for instance, to mainstream and broadly liberal scholarship. Conventional political science, for example, tends to take a 'hard power', institutional approach, to assume that liberal democracy was the goal of the uprisings, and to put issues of popular culture aside (Arjomand ed. 2015; Brownlee et al. 2015; Heydemann and Leenders 2014; Lynch 2014). In dynamic and interactionist studies of contentious politics, dominant at present in recent social movement studies, actors come together and are dis-assembled, political frontiers generated, and new forms appear and are erased by a variety of rather unpredictable, shapeless, micro-interactions and mechanisms (Beinin and Vairel eds. 2013; Bennani-Chraïbi 2017; Della Porta 2016; Ketchley 2017; Kurzman 2012; Volpi 2017; Volpi and Jasper eds. 2018). Here, the slow, shaping power of cultural change, body politics, and cultural hegemony drop from sight.

The point also applies to many critical accounts of the uprisings. Some, drawing on Gramsci, have shed vital light on political economy, socioeconomic factors, class struggle, state power, and counter-revolution (Achcar 2016; Munif 2013; Roccu 2013; Tansel & de Smet 2018). These studies, for all their strengths, often downplay the importance of popular culture. Contributions wrestling with the problem of revolutionary weakness 'from below', have offered key insights as to the revolutionaries' 'inability to construct' (Gramsci cited in Filippini 2017: 108), especially in regard to deficits on organization and strategy

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(Abdelrahman 2014; Bayat 2017; Beinin 2015; de Smet 2014). But these accounts have usually had less to say about subaltern cultural politics. Is this occlusion really justified? Did not Gramsci insist that cultural renovation and transformation was central to revolutionary change? Don't we need to know what organization and strategy was for? What, in fact, did 'the people want?' Reflecting on revolutionary defeat in 1919-20, Gramsci suggested that an important start point was to ask 'who we were, what we wanted [and] where we wished to go' (Gramsci cited in Buey 2015: 84). This article asks how a focus on subaltern cultural politics changes our understandings of 2011.

Cultural Politics and 2011

A number of studies have taken cultural politics seriously. Asef Bayat's important book stands out for analyzing 'revolutionary vision' (Bayat 2017). For Bayat, Egypt's 2011 was a revolution without revolutionaries: leading activists had only reformist views and demands. Their pervasive 'neoliberal normativity' prioritized the political over the economic, causing activists to lose touch with the masses. Subaltern 'radical impulses and initiatives' were not anchored by any 'serious intellectual articulation, ideological frame, or social movement' (Bayat 2017: 203). Neoliberal cultural hegemony here plays an important role by preventing vital alliances that could have formed a revolutionary bloc. Winegar's research can be read to complement such enquiry: she explores how Egyptian middle class 'aesthetic ordering' around cleanliness, respectability and civilization could act to divide activists and limit revolution (Winegar 2016).

This article, however, argues that it is useful to look beyond neoliberal normativity, middle class culture, subaltern 'impulses', and/or top-down revolutionary leadership, and to foreground the question of popular culture. The argument here is that a historically-situated subaltern cultural politics also mattered in revolutionary weakness. Researchers paying

attention to culture, gender, sexuality and body politics, including under the sign of Gramsci, have shed light on this (Armbrust 2019; Ghannam 2012; Khalil 2012; Mehrez 2012; Mostafa 2012, 2019; Pinilla 2019; Pratt 2005, 2007, 2018; Ryzova 2019; Salem and Taira 2012; Sanders IV and Visonà 2012; Winegar 2012, 2016). These studies shed vital light on subaltern politics, common sense, good sense, conceptions of the world, and forms of collective will. They can be read to indicate important limits on the transformative possibilities of the uprising of 2011. The aim here is to build on these studies in Gramscian perspective.

A Gramscian Perspective

This article draws on Gramscian perspectives on praxis – historically-embedded conscious, collective activity challenging subordination, changing subaltern status, building new social relations, and re-making hegemony. Central here is conscious activity among initially subaltern social groups (Green 2002: 2), who are entangled in complex and partially contradictory hegemonic structures, including common sense, diffused by ruling groups in civil society and absorbed and appropriated from below (Gramsci 1971: 333). Subaltern groups, who are never completely passive, develop a critical consciousness, searching to resolve contradictory consciousness, and building on the kernel of good sense that exists within common sense (Liguori 2015: 85-112). They and their organic intellectuals engage in cultural renovation, forge new conceptions of the world and a new collective will, defining new ends, demands, and purposes (Gramsci 1971: 130, 349). Praxis involves 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' (Gramsci 1971: 336-7). New democratic-centralist forms of organization test out and diffuse new ideas, and determine lines of collective action. Gramsci embraced two fundamental strategies – one involved a long 'war of position' in civil

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society, and the other a 'war of manoeuvre' confronting and re-making the state (Gramsci 1971: 194, 334-5; Gramsci 1977: 68; Gramsci 1978: 93; Thomas 2018: 86). Revolution here is not primarily an event, but involves 'continuous processes of transformation' (Abdelrahman 2014: 1). At stake is the construction of a new historical bloc, combining the state, the national-popular, a socialist economy, cultural renovation, and revolutionary leadership. The bloc sustains a post-subaltern unification of theory and practice, realizing an alternative form of hegemony.

In thinking 2011, a Gramscian perspective directs our attention, among other things, to subaltern cultural politics – the common sense, good sense, conceptions of the world and forms of collective will that infused and organized subaltern struggles, occupations, uprisings, demonstrations and strikes. This article aims to develop this line of investigation. A bottom-up focus seems particularly valid in a case when popular mobilisation was vital in the degradation of the police (Armbrust 2019: 23, 29, 125; Ismail 2012), the neutrality of the army, the occupation of public space, the elimination by fire of the ruling party (the NDP), the performance of popular authenticity, the fall of the dictator, the advent of the SCAF, the beginning of a two-year period of significant political freedom and contestation, and, with the uprising of 30 June 2013, the end of the Muslim Brotherhood presidency and the seizure by the Egyptian Armed Forces of state power on 3 July 2013.

This article is based on an indicative rather than exhaustive programme of research. I made five fieldwork trips to Egypt between June 2010 and April 2014. The first trip took place in June 2010, shortly after the murder of Khaled Said; the second in February 2011, in the immediate aftermath of the 18 days; the third in June 2011, when educated, urban youth were increasingly confronting the military and subaltern voices were increasingly asking why the revolution had not brought jobs and prosperity; the fourth in March 2012, when many of my educated interlocutors perceived that the revolutionary process was under dire threat and

many subaltern interlocutors were speaking of the need for stability. The final trip was in April 2014, amid a climate of repression, resistance, and populist nationalism in the wake of the Egyptian army's counter-revolutionary coup of July 2013. I carried out more than a dozen interviews in Arabic and English, held scores of conversations with activists, demonstrators, and bystanders, read the print media, and engaged in participant observation in activist events, discussions, meetings, and protests. Some of my networks, including among subaltern social groups, went back to the 1990s, when I had taught and researched in Cairo for two years. Other contacts were newly established, whether with and via educated activists and academics, or through encounters and conversations in the city, such as with shopkeepers or taxi-drivers, some of whom I met repeatedly. Secondary research on popular culture in Egypt has proven vital in allowing this indicative fieldwork to be contextualized and interpreted.

Good Sense against the Regime

During the eighteen days of popular uprising, 25 January – 11 February 2011, millions of Egyptians – including subaltern social groups, educated middle classes, liberal-democrats, revolutionary socialists, horizontalists, Islamists, women, industrial workers, public sector employees, the unemployed, the precarious, the marginalized, Copts and football fans – roared together in streets and squares with tremendous force that 'the people want to overthrow the regime' (*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*). This powerful collective will was built on and part of an emerging (especially since September 2000) popular, 'good sense', on which very diverse groups implicitly and explicitly agreed, which challenged, but also drew on 'common sense', and which identified the regime as the key source of oppression which the people needed to bring down. This good sense worked to stitch together an incipient, oppositional revolutionary bloc.

Against the hegemonic common sense in which President Mubarak was a father to 'his' nation, a pillar of the state, a hero of the 1973 war, a prudent steward of the economy, and loved and respected by the people, a common sense that could still bring out counter-demonstrations, even during the 18 days (Armbrust 2019: 26), what stood indicted in a widespread good sense was the 'regime'. In the images, slogans, chants, stickers, and media representations of the eighteen days, and according to the demonstrators, often men from the popular quarters that I interviewed, the 'regime' tended to mean Mubarak, the proposed line of succession to his son Gamal, a cluster of profiteering regime figures and crony business elites (especially those associated with Gamal Mubarak), figures such as Ahmed Ezz, and perhaps above all the Interior Minister (Habib Al-Adly), and the police, intelligence, and para-military forces that he commanded.

The regime, understood thus, was defined by and seen as given over to corruption (*fasad*). One popular sticker circulating in February 2011 showed what looked like an ordinary football team, but it was labelled 'team of the corrupt' (*muntakhib al-fasidin),* the head coach being Mubarak with '70 billion' and the team comprised of a series of well-known regime figures and crony capitalists, their football shirts emblazoned with a figure putting a price on their ill-gotten gains. This was a potent depiction in popular culture of 'the regime' – conceived as corrupt, 'blood-sucking', and as a gang of thieves. The critique of corruption – rather, than, for instance, capitalism – was absolutely central in 2011 (Armburst 2019: 30). The word conveyed connotations of private, immoderate gain by those with connections, failing in their divine and patriotic duties, and siphoning off the wealth of the country at the expense of the majority. As a taxi-driver said to me on 13 February 2011, corruption has been the main problem in the country, 'much of Egypt's wealth,' he said, 'has been robbed and taken abroad'.

Significant was the way popular delight at the fall of the regime was expressed in the week after 11 February 2011. I saw celebrations by young, low-income men, wherein a chant-leader would call out the name of a corrupt minister or businessman, and the group would call back 'goodbye [to your] thievery!' (*ma'sallama haramiyya*). The idea was that the 'blood-suckers' were gone or imprisoned, and the people would start to enjoy the fruits of their toil. As one demonstrator said to me on 14 February 2011, 'let's stop the corruption and Egypt will become rich again'. As a leading labour journalist told me in June 2010, in the new context of privatization in the 2000s, strikes and sit-ins were directed not against the nation, war, or development, but against 'greedy businessmen who are out for their own profit'.[1] Labour protests had also been directed, especially from 2006, against corrupt regime interference into union elections (Bishara 2018: 49-107). Much of the wave of 'cleansing' (*tathir*) of regime remnants and mini-tyrants from workplaces and factories that followed February 2011 (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014) was freighted with this sense that the old corruption was now to be expunged for the sake of social justice and development.

The corrupt regime and its minions was being contrasted with hard-working, pious, patriotic, clean and respectable people, trying to provide for their families and earn 'what they deserved' in very trying circumstances. A taxi-driver in his forties from a popular quarter told me in June 2011 that ordinary people had suffered from endless pressure. Egyptians were 'good people' (*tayyibin*) with simple demands. They 'just want to get a flat, respectable work, to get married [and] to raise kids' but they cannot manage, 'while others live by corruption with billions in their villas and with their landcruisers.' He declared that this was 'absolutely not social justice' and 'eventually there's an explosion'; 'you can only push people so far'.

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[1] Author Interview, Leading Labour Journalist and socialist, Cairo, 21 June 2010.

These forms of popular good sense were widely diffused and elaborated before, during and after the eighteen days. They were combined with another tissue of discourse associating the regime with violence, predation and above all thuggery (*baltagiyya*). For some of my interviewees, the last straw was watching demonstrators being attacked by police on 28 January. It led them to gather their friends and head to the streets, to take on the police officers that had been humiliating and oppressing them for years (Ismail 2006, 2012). Some distinguished in this respect on a class basis between rank and file policemen, and the officers who they targeted. Others had been moved during the Battle of the Camel, when hired regime thugs invaded Tahrir Square (Armbrust 2019: 27; Ghannam 2012). Such regime thuggery, as Ghannam points out, was being contrasted with popular bravery and honour (*gada'ana*). We the Egyptian people are 'not cowards', related one young, male demonstrator to me in June 2011. He said without shame that he had 'beat police, burnt cars' to save 'our country' from corruption and social injustice during the eighteen days. He told me he did it not for him, but for his son, so that the latter could live while he could not. He said, we have a saying 'those who have heart, get good fortune'. Here was toughness and honourable strength in defense of a popular good sense, fortified with 'spontaneous philosophy'. This popular good sense involved the feeling, as Khalil argues, that Mubarak, the old regime, the security forces were seen as no longer with us or of us: 'they became outsiders' (Khalil 2012: 260).

A gender politics was also at stake. Amid rising prices, poorer men could no longer be men, providing for families, and women could no longer be respectable, but were forced to risk shame in the search for income. Mubarak was said not to be a war hero but to have overshadowed 'the real heroes of the October war as a jealous wife would her rivals' (Salem and Taira 2012: 206). Mubarak here lost his status as a father to the nation and stood indicted as a 'jealous wife'. By contrast, the protagonists of the uprising could be figured, especially in the context of structuring, unequal burdens of domestic reproduction, as male (Winegar

2012) – while the implicit conception behind the mass presence of women on the streets – in a vital but relatively short-lived challenge to patriarchy – was that women too had a role in public, political protagonism. The young men on the streets were exercising physical prowess in combat, showing bravery in facing the powerful, and honour in the protection of women, children, or indeed, of middle class revolutionaries, who explicitly and implicitly called on them to do so. There was an important challenge here to middle class discourses which figured young men from the popular quarters as drug-addicts, loiterers, and criminals.

Common Sense: Trust in the Army

Amidst this emerging good sense, popular culture also included, and may even have developed during 2011-13, a hegemonic, many-layered, slow-moving common sense in which the Egyptian Armed Forces enjoyed confidence, prestige, and trust among 'the great masses of the population'. This common sense gave the army a 'very special position among most Egyptians' (Ryzova 2019: 10). My fieldwork notes are replete with references by subaltern social groups to trust in the army, and the idea that the army are 'from us'. A 'deeply institutionalized reverence for the military in Egyptian public culture' (Armbrust 2019: 141) was diffused in state, private, print, television, satellite, and social media, in films, songs, poetry, radio, TV drama series, circulated in posters, stickers, graffiti, and, especially during 2011-13, and popularized and developed by TV personalities such as Taufiq 'Ukasha 'the archdemagogue of the counterrevolution' (Armbrust 2019: xxiii), who offered 'unswerving allegiance to the military' (Armbrust 2019: 184). A poll carried out in June 2011, underlines the point, finding that '[n]early all Egyptians express confidence in the armed forces (99%), with 82% trusting them to a great extent . . . . Only 1% of the sample does not trust the armed forces at all' (Gawad et al 2011: 19).

The post-colonial genealogy of this common sense identification with the army reached back to the Nasser period when the army was credited with national independence and pan-Arab leadership, and was re-asserted in new ways in the wake of the military 'victory' in the 1973 war with Israel (Mostafa 2017). Also important was a political context in which the army, above all since 1969, had been far less involved than the interior ministry in domestic security, policing, repression, interrogation, torture, bribery, and daily abuse, allowing it to guard its reputation among subaltern social groups. Good sense indicting a corrupt regime co-existed with and was interwoven with a hegemonic common sense, diffused in civil society, in which the army enjoyed confidence, prestige, and trust.

The Popular Will, the Nation, Masculinity, Development, and Security

Trust in the army comprised several powerful connotative articulations. First, there was the association of the Egyptian army with the popular will. One of the ubiquitous slogans of the eighteen days insisted that 'the army and the people are one hand'. This was not just a tactical slogan emerging from the interactions of the moment (Ketchley 2017). It was also an emphatic expression of a slow-moving cultural politics with deep historical roots. The deployed army force was interpellated by protestors 'as not having brutalized or forsaken them, but [as] one that intervenes to halt violence and restore order, and in turn, remains of them' (Khalil 2012: 250, 256-7, 260). Demonstrators during the 18 days expressed the idea that the army, which had no longer been true to itself as an instrument of a corrupted regime, was now returning to its true destiny as ally, protector and representative of the people.

Of the scores of conversations that I joined with subaltern social groups among protestors in Cairo in February 2011, the hundreds of popular slogans I reviewed, the identification of the popular will with the army was ubiquitous, and contrary indications extremely rare. Twenty-something Muhammad Al-'Adawy from Upper Egypt, working in tourism, and a

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demonstrator in Tahrir during the 18 days, was convinced that the people should trust the army. 'Why? Because we know them, our brothers are all in the army . . . [and] they didn't move against the protestors'.[2] As a headline in the daily newspaper Al-Shuruq had it, on 14 February 2011, 'the army wins for the people'. The eighteen days, and the 'neutral' deployment of the army, which set about securing key institutions (such as state TV), but did not engage in the mass shooting of civilians and parted ways with the corrupt regime, resoundingly linked the Egyptian Armed Forces with the popular will. As a Cairo-based painter's foreman related when the army deployed on 28 January 2011, '"The army comes from us," he said, face beaming. "This is fantastic. It means the revolution will win!"' (cited in Armbrust 2019: 25). This common sense was implicit in, and publicly demonstrated by the mass draw-down of the crowds from Tahrir when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power on 11 February 2011. As Ryzova remarks '[t]he fundamental contradiction between . . . the army as the foundation of the regime as well as the 'protector of the revolution' – was not immediately obvious to most' (Ryzova 2019: 10). Popular culture, indeed, had the power to make this contradiction almost unthinkable.

A second and closely related connotative articulation associated the army in extraordinarily positive ways with the Egyptian nation, its history, present, and destiny. 'They [the army] have a great history,' I was told by one forty-something taxi-driver named Khaled, from a popular neighbourhood off the Pyramids Road, 'They protected the nation in 1973.' National honour, strength, discipline, belonging, unity and protection were all closely identified with the Egyptian Armed Forces, a common sense long diffused and developed in civil society (from cinema to TV series to schools), where representations abound of the 'heroism and patriotism of the Egyptian army' and 'the courage and discipline of our national army' (Mostafa 2017: 2, 8-9; Mostafa 2012: 262).

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[2] Author Conversation, Cairo, 14 February 2011.

These associations may well have been reinforced by the 18 days. My fieldwork notes from February 2011 show that I was impressed by the widely disseminated slogan: 'Hold your head up high, you're an Egyptian!' Another placard read 'I used to be afraid. Now I'm Egyptian,' containing the idea that popular assertion was a return to the true destiny and character of the Egyptian nation. Protestors chanted, 'we are not traitors or Iranians . . . we are all Egyptian' (Sanders IV and Visonà 2012: 234, see also 222-4). It was widely felt and believed, among protestors who waved the Egyptian flag up and down the country, that the Egyptian nation had been restored, its honour burnished by the collapse of the 'regime'. Later in 2011, martyrs were memorialized, in a restoration of patriotic songs, as 'the flowers that bloomed in the gardens of Egypt' (Armbrust 2019: 13). The collective 'we' that had brought down the regime was a national 'we', expressing the ineffable and transcendent qualities of the Egyptian national identity.

Army and nation were identified here in ways old and new. When I pushed one young, male, army-trusting demonstrator from the popular neighbourhood of Al-Shubra on the fact that the Egyptian army was bankrolled by the United States, he replied with the patriotic bravado of the moment that Egypt, would not need that 'American money' any more.[3] Here the link between the army and national independence was vividly marked. One taxi-driver, a university graduate on a low income, from Giza in his forties, and who had fought the police during the eighteen days, explained to me on 19 June 2011 that 'As the Prophet Muhammad said, the Egyptian people are the best soldiers. We are like a volcano! We can stand a lot, but then when we get angry, we explode.' Here the brave protagonism of honourable Egyptian men was sutured to soldiery itself. Protestors who drew down on 11 February did so with a

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[3] Author Conversation, Cairo, 14 February 2011.

strong sense of national pride – and one in which the army figured once again as saviour of the nation.

A third articulation linked the army to masculine honour. The military figure in popular culture (the officer, the soldier, the martyr) is a '*masculine* figure [emphasis in original]' (Mostafa 2017: 4), someone that young boys dream of becoming (Mostafa 2017: 8). The army soldier – in photographs, songs and films – is a 'revolutionary, fearless, fierce, gallant, yet handsome, refined, compassionate, poetic' (Khalil 2012: 255). Conscripts are 'sons and fathers of families sacrificing everyday comfort and security for the sake of protecting and building the nation' (Khalil 2012: 261). One forty-something taxi-driver named Khaled, from a popular neighbourhood off the Pyramids Road, explained to me in February 2011 that '[The army] unlike the police, they have *rigala* (manliness) . . . [they] know how to be decisive *(hazim)* and strong *(shadid)*'. This, Khaled explained, was an important quality, 'something good . . . to say *rigala* is to say someone is good . . . he can take care of his affairs, he will not let things slide . . . he will not let anything [bad] happen or do anything [oppressive] . . . *rigala* doesn't permit this. The army is strong! *Rigala* is strong!'[4]

A fourth association – both long-standing and underlined and developed amid the political instability and economic downturn of the 2011-2013 period – linked the army with development, technology, and employment. One of the loudest messages in the media, very much promoted by the SCAF, after 11 February 2011 was that workers' strikes and demonstrations should stop, were a 'danger' to Egypt, and that people should get back to work in order to get the economy back on track, and boost productivity. I spoke on 15 February 2011 on Tahrir Square to a Qur'an teacher of humble origins in his mid-30s, whose two boys were present with Egyptian flags on their arms. He told me that he supports the

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[4] Author Conversation, Cairo, 17 February 2011.

revolution but says the army are right to call an end to the labour protests as these will ruin the economy. He urged that 'we Egyptians must work hard to be productive with what we have'. By June 2011, popular voices now spoke of concrete experiences of economic downturn, which many attributed to the revolution (not the army). A young, taciturn taxi driver, told me, when I mention the revolution, that he is scared because 'there's no work, no movement, and no tourism. And this is a big problem!'

The army insisted that workers' strikes were based on self-interested, merely sectional demands. I heard similar narratives from interviewees. Muhammad was in his twenties, an employee bouquet-maker in a small flower business in an alley in downtown Cairo. He told me in June 2011 that there were those, in the workshop where he works, who are not inspired by love of country or by religion, as were the revolutionaries, but who simply make demands over wages and conditions that are narrow and self-interested; that this is not good and will not serve the country; and that 'these people must stop striking'. An unemployed university graduate, who respected the revolution and had fought during the eighteen days told me mid-June that there were 'too many protests everywhere . . . [Egyptians should instead] rebuild the country and recover our place in the world'. As a Coptic taxi-driver with two children told me in April 2014, the army was now 'rebuilding things'.

There was undoubtedly a widely held sense that the army could be trusted on the economy. It would deliver a stable framework within which economic growth and tourism could be rebuilt, and it would provide where the corrupt regime had failed. The army was depicted as a force against corruption, a theme vivified in the revival of nationalist songs during 2011. For instance, the lyrics of Abdel Halim Hafez's song 'Hikayat sha'b', revived in 2011, not only 'represent the army as liberator, they depict it as the force that cleansed and purged the country of corruption' and as a force 'seeking to restore ownership of the country to the people' through the nationalization of the Suez Canal (Khalil 2012: 256-57).

Finally, the long-standing belief that the military was the guarantor of security and stability of the state was repeated and arguably reinforced during the 2011-2013 period. Soon after the fall of Mubarak, the army was stating that ongoing protests would undermine stability and security. One such message appeared in the daily newspaper Al-Akhbar, on 15 February 2011, for instance, under the headline 'the army speaks frankly to the people'. Themes of state security and stability were developed by the army and diffused very widely in the media through the period. For example, the well-known SCAF spokesperson, Mohsen Al-Fangari, stated in July 2011 that the national interests were damaged by 'deviance' from peaceful means by protestors, who were also involved in the spread of rumours and false information, damaging the public utilities, ruining the nation and putting special interests above the 'higher interests of the country' and above 'the reputation of the armed forces, with their historical responsibility'. He maintained that the 'armed forces are aided by the confidence of the people, and emanating from its national foundations they assure you that they will not allow anyone to seize power or to exceed legitimacy' (Armbrust 2019: 113). These statements were certainly mocked, especially among educated revolutionaries, but they should not be viewed simply as regime propaganda. In depicting ongoing protests as threats to the true interests of the Egyptian state secured by the army, they had real, slow-moving meaning and traction. Millions of Egypt were 'brought up to believe strongly in our national army as the protector of the nation from [internal subversion] and foreign invasions' (Mostafa 2017: 8).

An unemployed university graduate in his forties told me in mid-June 2011, for instance, that 'there shouldn't be protests against the army – because this will leave Egypt weakened. Perhaps Israel will come and hit us – perhaps anyone can come and take our country.' Another far-from-wealthy interlocutor assured me that protest in general was an American plot to strip Egypt of its stability and weaken the state. National security arguments became

more telling in the face of armed attacks by Islamists in the Sinai, and as Libya, Syria, and Yemen descended into civil war during the period 2011-2013. In popular discourse, diffused in the media increasingly in 2012 and 2013, Leftists and the Brotherhood, often depicted as pawns of outside forces, were said to be 'trying to overthrow the state' (Armbrust 2019: 201). Opposition to a regime as 'gang of thieves' did not necessarily imply opposition to the state. In a growing layer of common sense, protestors (rather than the regime) were seen as undermining the state and its higher, national interests. For instance, the association of protest with thuggery (*baltagiyya*) surfaced regarding sit-in protests as early as March and April 2011 (Armbrust 2019: 101). This was in part a SCAF narrative which insisted that 'thugs' and 'outlaws' had infiltrated the squares; that the women among them were shameful, loose, 'not like your daughter or mine' as the military declared, and even 'prostitutes', staying out all night and mixing with strange men (Armbrust 2019: 101). The military's virginity tests, and the brutal sexual violence they involved, could be associated with the protection of male honour and female respectability. Protestors, the army said, should go home and rebuild Egypt. Such statements articulated with common sense (Khalil 2012: 265). The accusation of betrayal and subversion dogged those who would protest against the army, which was almost synonymous with the state (Mostafa 2017: 113).

A taxi-driver from a popular quarter, in eloquent vernacular, told me in June 2011 a long story about a relative who had been car-jacked, lamented the loss of law and order in the country following the revolution, moved on to the idea that the bad driving that I saw around me resulted from a new and unwonted lack of respect for the police, and reached the climax of his oratory with a proud and emphatic declaration: 'I nominate [for president] Hosni Mubarak! / *ana murashah Hosni Mubarak!'*. Here was a telling performance of an emerging idea that the 25 January revolution, far from ushering in a new epoch of prosperity and

stability, was resulting in chaos, and the status quo ante needed to be restored by the army for the sake of security.

Meanwhile, throughout the post-Tahrir period, state and private media spoke of protestors as bent on looting and pillage, or as trouble-makers, or as aiming to stir up division and hatred, while associating stability and state security with the army. Popular figures in the media hammered away on these themes. 'Ukasha kept up 'a drumbeat of conspiracy theories "proving" that the revolution was brought about by foreign agents who wanted to destroy Egypt', all in a 'folksy idiom obviously designed to appeal to a rural and lower-middle-class audience' (Armbrust 2019: 184). 'Ukasha insisted that 'the main thing is the army'; that a 'state without an army and without police and without a judicial authority and institutions is no state' (ibid., 189). 'Ukasha went as far as to claim that the scandalous incident when a soldier was shown beating a woman, revealing her 'blue bra' in public was in fact staged by a hidden hand 'to discredit the military' (Armbrust 2019: 199). '[O]ne could not help wondering', writes Armbrust, 'whether SCAF may have needed 'Ukasha more than he needed them' (Armbrust 2019: 203).

These discourses had popular traction. This was particularly evident during the massacre by the military of peaceful demonstrators at Maspero on 9 October 2011: 'in which at least twenty-eight demonstrators were mown down by automatic weapons and run over by military vehicles' (Ryzova 2019: 33). One appliance repairman, and Salafi, believed that what the army did in Maspero was 'self-defense'. He said that the Copts went there 'looking for trouble', and 'calling for violence against the state'. He would not countenance any doubts about the army's motives: 'They really know how to sort out the country', adding the mantra familiar from my own fieldwork, 'the army is from us' (Armbrust 2019: 153, 155).

Good Sense against the Army?

Hegemonic common sense was neither static, monolithic nor uncontested. Smaller groups of

activists, some educated, some drawn from subaltern social groups, recognizing the problem

of military deployment during the eighteen days, tried without success to continue the

occupation of Tahrir after 11 February 2011, and looked on the popular draw-down with grief

and anguish.[5] As one prescient handwritten poster held by a demonstrator during February

2011 read: 'A people who produce half a revolution, dig their own grave'.[6] Indeed, against

the prevailing hegemony, and as 2011 went on, as the military police were implicated in

abuse and killing, and desired reforms were not forthcoming, a good sense became more

widely diffused, especially among educated activists, that the SCAF was a block on

meaningful transformation.

> By November 2011 . . . . [t]he slogan 'Down with Military Rule' became widely
>
> adopted by large segments of the middle class, well beyond the circle of hardcore
>
> revolutionaries' (Ryzova 2019: 13).

One popular slogan was: 'The people want the execution of the Field Marshall [Tantawi]/ *al*

–sha'b yurid i'dam al-mushir'. The idea was more widely articulated that the SCAF was but

the latest iteration the regime (Mehrez 2012: 19; Ryzova 2019: 36). Some football fans and

numerous street fighters learned from bitter experience that police, security and military were

'dogs' and 'killers' who had stolen the revolution from the start (Ryzova 2019: 19, 33-34).

Some have gone as far as to argue that mass faith in the army was 'crushed' during 2011-12

(Mostafa 2017: 119).

Contestation there was, and common and good sense was fractured, group-specific and many-

layered. Nonetheless, popular faith in the army was profoundly rooted. The SCAF was not

identical with the army, which was rarely doubted. My conversations with educated,

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[5] Interviews and conversations with photographer Yasser Alwan, February 2011.
[6] Photograph sent to me by Yasser Alwan.

revolutionary activists during 2011-13 led me to believe that condemning the army was simply not an option as it lacked popular credibility; the only viable strategy was to identify the SCAF with a corrupt regime, dissociating the SCAF from the army. Indeed, professions of love for the army were widely heard, even among revolutionaries opposed to the SCAF. Philopateer Gamil, for instance, a radical priest, who challenged the SCAF before the 9 October 2011 demonstration at Maspero, criticizing the abuse of the military police, and calling for an alliance uniting lay Christian and non-Islamist Muslim revolutionary forces. Nonetheless, he stated:

> we love the armed forces and the army, because that army comes from us. If you think about it, you have friends and relatives in the Egyptian army . . . this small group that was there at Maspero is a disgrace on the Egyptian army (Armbrust 2019: 153).

Even regarding the Maspero massacre, then, the thesis of a few rotten apples was sustained, and the honour of the army, even by a revolutionary, was upheld.

New forms of good sense emerging from street battles and indicting the military remained confined to a thin layer of cross-class activists, did not diffuse very widely or articulate very deeply in vernacular culture, and were not developed into a larger cultural, intellectual or ideological project. As Ryzova puts it

> The events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street can only be described as an urban battle fought by social actors who lacked any political plan; who had no notion of, and no faith in, any long-term political purpose (Ryzova 2019: 9).

Street fighters were involved in episodes and fragments of masculine autonomy, heroism, and nobility – but their conceptions of masculinity were not very distinctive, their good sense was not that far diffused, and their actions did not go very far in discrediting the military. By early 2012, non-Islamist political forces had been 'widely discredited by street battles that made much of the public who were not politically mobilized uncomfortable' (Armbrust 2019: 118).

The critique of the military was not developed – it was not given cultural and ideological substance. Protestors who had insisted on peaceful means (*silmiyya*), indeed, were discredited by an association with street-fighting. The revolutionary youth were trounced in the elections of 2011-12, while the winners of the vote – the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Al-Nur Party – positioned themselves as supporters of the SCAF and the military.

Analysis

While hegemonic common sense was never seamless or uncontested, much of it wove together a fabric of trust and confidence in the Egyptian Armed Forces. Mass confidence and trust in the army was inscribed in entrenched and slow-moving common sense associations between the army, the popular will, the Egyptian nation, honourable masculinity, development, and security. Such common sense associations not only continued through the period 2011-2013, but were in various sites and ways restored and burnished during this time. These associations co-existed, intertwined with – and sometimes actually drew strength from – a good sense indicting a corrupted regime. This subaltern cultural politics can help make sense of the fact that by February 2013, in a country chafing under a Muslim Brotherhood presidency, 'many were calling openly for the army to return to power' (Armbrust 2019: 202). The capacity of the military to enjoy such a degree of prestige in popular culture made it a formidable force, and a major obstacle to any alternative would-be hegemonic social force on the Egyptian scene.

The Muslim Brotherhood, arguably, in spite of its depth of history, organization, and degree of mass support, and roots in forms of religious common sense and popular good sense, and available alternative conceptions of the world, never developed the collective will to make a serious bid for moral, cultural and intellectual leadership at the level of the social formation as a whole. The Brotherhood, led by a conservative Old Guard, abandoned the revolutionary

bloc shortly after the eighteen days, sat in the coat-tails of the military, deferred to the security apparatus, and banked on election results, aiming to secure a place in a military-led state, while failing to defend democracy, and continuously narrowing (rather than broadening) the breadth and appeal of its political and cultural project.

The non-Islamist revolutionaries, many of whom persisted within the shrinking and fragmenting revolutionary bloc until the bitter end, were not really thinking in terms of political leadership at the level of the state, and, had no detailed, alternative revolutionary vision to cement together the revolutionary bloc. They were ideologically divided, including socialists, liberal democrats, and horizontalists. These educated activists lacked an alternative, would-be hegemonic, intellectual and cultural project. Grievances were 'largely formulated in negative terms rather than in positive demands' (Armbrust 2019: 1). They did not re-articulate common sense, or work new streams of good sense into a developed, new conception of the world. Their lack of mental preparedness (Abdelrahman 2014), of organizational depth and strategic vision may have made any bid for hegemony impractical in any case. The revolutionary youth lacked the confidence, prestige and trust of the masses, a major obstacle to the development of their political and revolutionary capacities.

Subaltern cultural politics can help to explain how the army was able to come to the fore: not only because of its geopolitical, political, organizational, coercive or economic capacities, and not only because of the weaknesses of its opponents, but also because it was able to win and enjoy trust culturally among subaltern social groups. Cultural struggle at the popular level mattered in revolutionary weakness, and the hegemony of the Egyptian Armed Forces was a vital part of the defeat and fragmentation of the revolutionary bloc. In spite of human rights abuses, and the lack of charismatic leadership, trust in the army was only superficially shaken between March 2011 and 2012. Hegemonic common sense prevailed. The mantras of national unity and masculinism that had been so diversely present among great masses

powerfully discredited new and ongoing forms of political difference as instability and division, impugned workers' demands for economic justice as merely self-interested, and later de-legitimated Muslim Brotherhood Islamism as *akhwanat al-dawla* (the Brotherhoodization of the state), and after 3 July 2013, pushed the Brotherhood beyond the pale of legitimate politics altogether (Armbrust 2019: 179). Trust in the army as deliverer from civil war and the Brotherhood abounded among the millions of demonstrators on 30 June 2013 (Mostafa 2017: 3). The argument here is that 'power against' (the regime) had no cultural and ideological mode by which to realize the unity of the revolutionary bloc after the fall of the dictator, while widely-appropriated hegemonic common sense ('power to') (Modonesi 2014: 142), in regards to state, nation, masculinity and security, both divided the revolutionary bloc and reinforced the political monopoly of the Egyptian Armed Forces, which made believable claims to embody it.

Conclusion

Drawing on the case of Egypt, this article offers a Gramscian perspective on the popular uprisings of 2011. It opens up a hitherto under-written line of political investigation into popular culture. It looks beyond more familiar issues of geopolitics, institutional power, political economy, and activist organization and strategy, and argues that both the enormous oppositional force of the uprising in Egypt and its limits in point of revolutionary transformation depended in part on subaltern cultural politics. The article argues that diverse crowds were powerfully united in their determination to bring down the regime by a developed oppositional good sense in which a corrupted regime was indicted. This gendered conception had been closely woven into the everyday lives and struggles of a wide variety of subaltern social groups during the decade prior to 2011. This cultural politics was a powerful coordinator of the uprising. Limits on revolutionary change in politics, economy and society owed much to the way this good sense only indicted a 'corrupt regime' and was not

developed into an alternative form of cultural and political hegemony. Instead, a hegemonic, renovated common sense expressing the confidence of great masses in Egyptian army, worked to fragment the oppositional bloc, disabled any construction of a new historical bloc, and operated to enshrine the army at the helm of the state.

This perspective urges, against top-down accounts, the bottom-up study of popular mobilisation in making sense of the origins, course and consequences of 2011. It aims, further, to steer against interactionist accounts by indicating that popular cultural politics is not a shapeless, micrological, relational multiplicity, but has some continuity and substance. The main goal is to complement important existing critical studies of revolutionary weakness, expanding our sense of what Gramscian perspectives can achieve: first, the article points out against sociological essentialism and class determinism, the role of cultural politics, historical specificities included, in uniting and dividing the diverse subaltern and middle class sociologies of the uprising. Second, the article argues that organization and strategy were not the only shackles on revolutionary transformation. We must pay attention to what organization and strategy were for, and concern ourselves with conceptions capable of becoming hegemonic among popular groups. In a revolution, strategy and organization alone, without an alternative cultural and political project, are insufficient. Third, the article warns against any romanticization of 'fleeting anti-government sentiment', however impressive, and even noble in its immediacy, suggesting that we also pay attention to relatively slow-moving subaltern subjectivities and forms of popular culture, 'common sense', 'good sense', ideological development, and cultural renovation. Fourth, the article points away from a Vanguardist over-emphasis on revolutionary leadership as compared to popular self-activity. It is not only the urban-middle classes who are responsible for the 'mental labour' of revolution. There were limits on what such leaders could achieve or do. A Gramscian perspective requires an organic, and not a Leninist development of revolutionary vision. In

such a perspective, a broad cultural politics, diverse and democratic forms of leadership, and the discovery of the truth together, are vital. Finally, the article argues that we should not assume that neoliberalism is the beginning and the end of the problem of revolutionary weakness in 2011, a perspective by turns too mechanical and fatalistic. Neoliberalism is compatible with widely varying forms of cultural politics. Egypt's popular, cultural politics have their own relative autonomy and historical specificity within the complex constellation of global neoliberalism. This article suggests that the revolution was not just defeated by 'the capitalist global superelites' (Armbrust 2019: xv). Popular cultural politics also played their part. A reading that reduces subaltern cultural politics to an epiphenomena of neoliberalism should be resisted, the better to transform neoliberalism itself.

Overall, the article argues that in understanding 2011, questions of cultural hegemony and alternative hegemony can usefully be broached and its subaltern cultural politics unpacked. We can read the limits on revolutionary change partly in terms of the limits on the alternative cultural hegemony, and the lack of a developed alternate cultural project beyond the fall of the regime, and the ways in which the subaltern cultural politics associated the popular will, the nation, masculinity, development and state security with the Egyptian Armed Forces. If this is true, then what Stuart Hall called in a different context 'the hard road to renewal', and the new long war of position, will inevitably involve a popular cultural renovation in regards to these very issues.

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