

Introduction: Trapped in History Revolution in Egypt

People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.

James Baldwin¹

As a way of getting seriously past the weightlessness of one theory after another, the remorseless indignations of orthodoxy, and the expressions of tired advocacy to which we are often submitted, the exercise involved in figuring out where the theory went and how in getting there its fiery core was reignited as invigorating – is also another voyage, one that is central to intellectual life.

Edward Said²

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

Antonio Gramsci³

The basic premise of the theory of hegemony is one with which few would disagree: that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas.

Thomas Bates⁴

The afterlives of an event are often as revealing as the event itself, shedding light on pre-histories and futurities; on the multiple trajectories that could have been, and the one that eventually was. This is a book about the afterlives of Egypt's process of decolonization, and in particular the creation of a hegemonic project that reverberated far into Egypt's future. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is one that has been written about extensively, but materialized rarely. And yet in the two decades following Egyptian independence from Britain in 1952, we see the rise and fall of a period of hegemony in which anticolonialism, nationalism, and independent development came to define Egypt's

¹ 1984. ² 2000, 230. ³ 1992, 32. ⁴ 1975, 351.

future. The fall of this project was just as momentous as its creation; and its afterlives were to travel far into the future, eventually culminating in a second revolution in 2011. This book is a journey between these two revolutions, situating 2011 within the broader trajectory of 1952.

The inspiration for this book started with the 2011 Egyptian revolution, but the book itself has largely turned out to be centred on a different revolution in Egyptian history: the coup d'état and popular revolution of 1952. This project initially began as an attempt to understand the temporality of the 2011 revolution; I was interested in asking why these particular events happened at this particular moment. In attempting to place 2011 within a historical trajectory, I found there was one part of this historical puzzle that struck me as unique, one era in modern Egyptian history that was particularly different from the others. I repeatedly found myself returning to a single question, one that was always at the back of my mind: why was the Nasserist era so singular? This singularity expressed itself in different ways: it is the era that has been most written about in post-independence Egypt; it is an era embroiled in intense controversy; and it is an era that expresses itself in contradictory ways in the Egyptian popular imagination. It is also a project that very much set the limits of the political from 1952 onwards. It seemed to me that there was something different about the Nasser years, an intuition that my focus on 2011 was incomplete unless I connected these two historical moments into one single trajectory.

The contradictions of the Nasser years, as well as the highs and lows, suggested to me that something happened during that historical moment that was powerful enough to leave legacies into the present, legacies that were very much a part of the 2011 revolution. Nasserism as a political project was formed through the radical movements of the 1930s and 1940s, produced in and through the global politics of decolonization, and representative of major shifts in elite nation-building in Egypt and the broader postcolonial world. While the Nasserist moment heralded the creation of a new nation based on industrialization and anti-colonial nationalism, its defeat in 1967 – after the Six-Day War with Israel – brought into being an entirely new historical moment. The rise of neoliberal restructuring in the late 1960s, and the acceleration of this in the mid 1990s, saw the end of Egypt's project of decolonization and the beginning of its integration into a new world order.

My journey to understand the singularity of the Nasserist project led me to Antonio Gramsci. A Southern Italian Marxist, Gramsci's most well-known work, *The Prison Notebooks*, is a mine of information spread across hundreds of individual notes that include everything from his major intellectual theorizations to small reminders to himself about future research. Written during his time in prison, the notes and their fragmentary nature reveal the astonishing feat Gramsci accomplished by writing them in those conditions, as well as the limits to trying to extract clearly delineated theories from these notebooks. His concepts of hegemony, passive revolution, and the historical bloc come together into a complex framework analysing society and social change, and his positionality as a Southern Italian led him to focus on inequalities produced within the nation; both of these make him invaluable to theorizing on the uneven nature of global capitalism.⁵ His concept of hegemony is a unique articulation of what makes some political projects rule more effectively than others: a balance between consent and coercion, where coercion and consent exist in a dialectical relationship. This book argues that the Nasserist project remains the only - albeit short-lived - instance of a hegemonic project in modern Egyptian history, and that the 2011 revolution signified the end-point of its decline, decades after it was created.

Gramsci did not understand hegemony as something 'positive' or 'negative' but rather a condition of rule that creates powerful effects. As John Chalcraft has written: 'Hegemonic rule is often seen negatively by those who mistakenly identify this strategy of power with the values approved within a given hegemonic system'.⁶ Hegemony, as he goes on to note, does not refer to a given set of values, but a particular *structure of power*.⁷ It is precisely this structure of power - so present under Nasser - that I am interested in. The polarization that exists between accounts that romanticize Nasserism and those that hold it accountable for Egypt's current predicaments has often meant that the complexity of that particular moment is erased. The book is interested in understanding the power Nasserism exerted, both then and now, and the ways it seeps into the present. Understanding Nasserism as hegemonic, then, is an attempt at unpacking how different threads came together at a particular moment in time to create the possibility of hegemony in Egypt.

⁵ Morton 2007. ⁶ 2007, 181.

⁷ *Ibid.* Gramsci, for instance, struggled for a socialist hegemony.

Despite beginning with Gramsci and his theory of hegemony, this book owes an equal debt to Frantz Fanon, without whom I would not have understood hegemony and its afterlives in the way that I have. Fanon's work illuminated the centrality of decolonization as a political process on the one hand, and the pitfalls embedded within anticolonial nationalism on the other. Fanon's work has experienced something of a revival over the past several decades. In some ways, making extensive use of Fanon in a book about revolution in Egypt is unsurprising: he was, after all, *the* theorist of decolonization. In other ways, it may seem strange, given that his work is not commonly used in studies of the Middle East.⁸ Fanon's call to 'stretch Marxism' and his detailed attention to the specificity of capitalism in the postcolony permeate this book, allowing me to approach hegemony and its afterlives in a way that makes space for colonial histories. Beyond using Fanon's theoretical and empirical work in this book, Fanon has also greatly influenced the ways in which I think of decolonization and its contradictions. His thinking has been invaluable in positing the limitations but also the immense possibilities that coloured that particular moment. Moreover, his work is extraordinary in the agenda it put forth around the coming together of Marxism, postcolonialism, and capitalism.

This book is therefore an attempt at imagining a dialogue between Gramsci and Fanon, and by extension the theoretical canons of Marxism and anti/postcolonialism. I ultimately argue that the synthesis between these two canons is fruitful, suggesting that there is something in Marxism that is important for postcolonial nations, as many Arab and African scholars and activists have said before me. It also suggests that there is – and this is more important – something in postcolonial contexts for Marxism, as witnessed by the long tradition of postcolonial Marxist theorizing. By adopting the lens of travelling theory, I explore both what Gramsci's work can tell us about the 2011 revolution and modern Egyptian history – through the lens of elite configurations and hegemony – as well as what Egypt can tell us about Gramsci, and Marxist theory more broadly. Each chapter engages with some of the problematics around applying Gramsci's thought in contexts such as Egypt, and considers the forms in which they are most useful. This exploration is done vis-à-vis Fanon's work and in particular his concept of stretching Marxism.

⁸ There are exceptions to this, most notably in work on Palestine and Algeria, as well as recent texts by scholars such as Stefania Pandolfo (2018).

Marxism in the Postcolony; the Postcolony in Marxism

Marxism was part and parcel of the imagined futures that coloured the moment of decolonization, despite clear limitations characterizing its political programme. David Scott captures the complexities of Marxism in the postcolonial world when he writes, ‘For those of us born into the uncertain aftermath of sovereignty, Marxism has defined in a very fundamental way the ethical-political horizon of our visions of – and commitments to – the making of just and independent societies. We were still haunted by the spectre of a theory that would enable us to deduce a set of rational political practices and procedures for the radical transformation of our societies. It was, if you like, the remnants of our nostalgia’.⁹ Similarly, Alia Mossallam notes that what was hegemonic under Nasser was a *socialist imaginary*, which people related to and willingly sacrificed for.¹⁰ What does it mean to be haunted by a moment during which there were multiple alternatives, if we understand our contemporary moment as a ‘world without alternatives’? Scott rightly points to both the limitations of nostalgia and the risks that come from postcolonial scholars disavowing Marxism: ‘When Marxism is criticised, what is at stake is the theoretical apparatus for reading history rather than the political question of the criteria by which the shape of an alternative future can be affirmed or refused’.¹¹

A central claim of this book is that Marxism – as a ‘theoretical apparatus for reading history’ – can offer a more telling account of revolution in Egypt. Marxist thought and practice were very much part and parcel of the politics of the Middle East and Africa throughout the twentieth century.¹² Debates within intellectual circles, labour unions, resistance groups, and anti-imperial movements engaged with the core tenets of Marxist theory, and sought to replicate socialist and communist models across the two regions. These stories have been marginal to the way we tell Marxist history, which has tended to focus on the decline that followed the failure of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. These stories have also been marginal to the historiography of the Middle East, where nationalism and anti-colonial resistance have been understood as autonomous, and the Marxist inflections of the region have been ignored or minimized. Yet we only need to turn to the

⁹ 1996, 1. ¹⁰ 2012, 86. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² See Samir Amin, Anouar Abdel-Malek, Mahdi Amel, and Nazih Ayubi, among others.

debates among intellectuals and political leaders to see just how influential the concepts put forward by Karl Marx and numerous subsequent Marxists were to people across Africa and the Middle East who were grappling with the material and ideological effects of European colonial rule. This has already been elucidated by scholars within the Black Radical Tradition such as Cedric Robinson, Claudia Jones, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Rodney, and C. L. R. James as well as scholars working on African nationalism vis-à-vis the various African contexts.¹³ It is safe to say that Marxism provided an important paradigm for political change across the world throughout the early twentieth century.

Marxism and postcolonial theory have long engaged with one another, and in many ways these discussions form the basis of the arguments made throughout this book. A shift within postcolonial studies away from grand narratives and towards a more post-modernist inflection was neatly encapsulated by Edward Said early on: ‘The earliest studies of the postcolonial were by such distinguished thinkers as Anwar Abdel-Malek [*sic*], Samir Amin, C.L.R. James; almost all were based on studies of domination and control made from the standpoint of either a completed political independence or an incomplete liberationist project. Yet whereas post-modernism, in one of its most famous programmatic statements (by Lyotard), stresses the disappearance of the grand narratives of enlightenment and emancipation, the emphasis behind much of the work done by the first generation of postcolonial artists and scholars is exactly the opposite: the grand narratives remain, even though their implementation and realization are at present in abeyance, deferred, or circumvented’.¹⁴ Edward Said’s mention of Anouar Abdel-Malek, Samir Amin, and C. L. R. James as the ‘first generation’ of postcolonial thinkers is striking given that all three were Marxists. And while Marxist scholars have had a lot to say about postcolonial studies and its postmodern inflection,¹⁵ it is important to also note that the Eurocentrism of much

¹³ Rodney 1972; Robinson 1983; Du Bois 1933; James 1938/2001. In particular, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote: ‘Imported Russian communism ignores the incontrovertible fact of a vertical fissure, a complete separation of classes by race’ (cited in Sekyi-Otu 1996, 15).

¹⁴ 1995, 5.

¹⁵ See Vivek Chibber (2014) for the most recent iteration of this. Previous materialist critiques of postcolonial studies include Brennan 2006; Parry 2004; Bartolovich and Lazarus 2002; Sinha and Varma 2017; Dirlik 1994.

Marxist theory is no small challenge to any attempt to analyse the postcolonial world. Nor is the scholarship of Marxists working within postcolonial contexts or racialized contexts in the Global North necessarily as influential within Marxist theory as it should be.¹⁶ This is not meant to underplay the significance of postcolonial Marxist work, but rather to highlight the continuing dominance of perspectives on capitalism that underplay the impact of racism and colonialism.

Perhaps, as Rashmi Varma and Subir Sinha suggest, the fields of Marxism and postcolonial studies are too broad and unstable to be compared in any productive way:

Does one go with early or late Marx, the mechanistic or the Romantic Marx, or indeed the canonical or the ‘Other’ Marx? Is one more partial to world systemic derivations from Marx, or to ‘political’ Marxism? Does one, conversely, follow the postcolonial theory that is inextricable from postmodern and poststructuralist formulations, or one that hitches itself to revolutionary anticolonial thought? Does one concede that modernity arose in ‘Europe’ or ‘the West’, thereby underscoring the stability of these terms, or does one see modernity as emerging as a single but uneven system? In the heat of these polemics, these differences *within* Marxism and postcolonial theory, which exist prior to the differences *between* them, are dissolved.¹⁷

The point about differences *within* rather than between Marxism and postcolonial theory brings us back to the large theoretical canon produced by anticolonial and postcolonial scholars working with the structures of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. What distinguishes them is not whether they are loyal to Marxism or postcolonial theory, but rather that they use particular debates that already exist within both fields to produce unique insights into the workings of global politics today. For it is in the work of postcolonial Marxists that we see a rigorous analysis of capitalism, racism, and colonialism, and where we begin to see the vast potential for an alliance between Marxism and postcolonial theory. This is exemplified through the work of Middle Eastern and African-based Marxists such as Samir Amin, Anouar Abdel-Malek, Frantz Fanon, Mehdi Amel, Mehdi Ben

¹⁶ This is in spite of the importance given to imperialism by influential early Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, not to mention Marx himself in his later writings; see Anderson 2016. Similarly, Giovanni Arrighi, Emmanuel Wallerstein, and Robert Cox, to name a few, have all paid attention to the centrality of imperialism in capitalist expansion.

¹⁷ 2015, 6.

Barka, Amílcar Cabral, and Kwame Nkrumah; whose work analysing capitalism through imperialism sits alongside the work of Claudia Jones, George Padmore, Fidel Castro, and Eduardo Galeano.

Along these lines, Rahul Rao has called for ‘recovering reparative readings’ of postcolonialism and Marxism.¹⁸ Arguing against a reading of Marx’s ambivalence about imperialism as pro-imperialist, and noting how his views on imperialism shifted as European empires spread, Rao shows that the blanket designation of Marxism as Eurocentric fails to attend to the nuances embedded within Marx’s position on imperialism. While the debate around Marx’s Eurocentrism is an important one, I am equally interested in what gets represented as ‘Marxism’ in this debate. In other words, what are we assuming to be the Marxist ‘canon’? If we take seriously the work of Samir Amin, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, and Claudia Jones, then the Marxist canon itself is not as stable as often imagined. The canon is a global canon, made up of scholars, activists, and political actors. It spans over two centuries, and is made up of people from every part of the world. This is the Marxist canon that inspires so many of us, and that is always already connected to postcolonialism.

This book, then, is an attempt at ‘reparative reading’ by bringing Gramsci and Fanon into an imagined conversation. Reading Fanon through Edward Said’s concept of travelling theory, and focusing particularly on his concept of ‘stretching Marxism’, I explore how Gramsci’s concepts travel to the Middle East, in effect bringing Fanon and Gramsci into a sphere of engagement.¹⁹ The concept of travelling theory was formulated by Edward Said²⁰ to discuss the ways in which theories travel across space (and time) and what happens to them when they do; the concept of ‘stretching’, and in particular the stretching of Marxism, as illustrated by Fanon²¹ to explore how Marxism changes when it ‘meets’ postcolonial contexts. These concepts refer to two separate albeit connected movements. The first is the movement of theory from a particular space and time to another – in this case from Southern Italy in the early twentieth century to Egypt in

¹⁸ 2017.

¹⁹ Adam David Morton has previously explored what it would mean to think about Gramsci through Said’s notion of travelling theory, in particular in relation to passive revolution (2013). I discuss this piece further in the following chapter.

²⁰ 1983. ²¹ 1963.

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The second is the movement that happens to the theories themselves, as they stretch and shift form in a new context. These two movements frame the book, and drive the questions asked in each chapter.

Ultimately, although the book aims to contribute to broader debates about Marxist theory in postcolonial contexts, its analysis also makes its contribution through an intervention in ongoing debates about the 2011 Egyptian revolution, and Egyptian political change in general. This is the context that grounds the concepts and theories discussed. This context is neither a prop for a larger theoretical argument nor is it simply background information that lends colour to the text; instead it is a living, breathing subject through which I think with Gramsci and Fanon's concepts. Rather than Egypt being the context to which Gramsci is applied, I am equally interested in what Egypt's political history has to say about Gramsci. This distinction is important, as it foregrounds the postcolonial context and the debates and events that unfold within this context as leading narratives of political change without defaulting to colonial conceptions of linear progress. The 2011 revolution is an important part of this context, but as the following chapters show, it is not the main protagonist; the revolution was monumental but must always be historicized.

Revolutionary Events, New Paradigms

This book aims to make a theoretical intervention in debates on Egyptian political projects modern Egyptian revolutions, and capitalist development in Egypt. The 2011 revolution can be read as an invitation to return back to some of the stories we have told ourselves about Egypt, the Middle East, and the broader postcolonial world. This book draws on many of these stories, and thus its empirical material is wide and varied, from economic reports from the Egyptian Central Bank to ethnographies of class and masculinity. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony as a guiding light reveals some of these different patterns, allowing us to think of Egyptian elites and Egyptian revolutions in different ways. This book aims to explore the particular characteristics of Egypt's elites by looking at the various projects that they have undertaken, tracing their relationships to other centres of power such as subaltern groups and transnational elites, and mapping the rise and fall of different elite configurations over time. Engaging with Gramscian and Fanonian concepts

allows for a more complex, historical and global exploration of changes within Egypt's elite projects and the ways in which these led to the 1952 revolution, the 2011 revolution, and the shifts in between.

Egyptian politics between the 1952 and 2011 revolutions is the context through which I bring together Gramsci and Fanon and where I locate my analysis. The 2010/2011 revolutions in the Middle East have reignited curiosity in a region that has long interested scholars of global politics. This book builds on recent work that has looked at Gramsci's concepts in the context of Egypt, most notably Brecht De Smet's *Gramsci in Tahrir*, Alia Mossallam's *Stories of Peoplehood*, Roberto Roccu's *The Political Economy of the Egyptian Revolution: Mubarak, Economic Reforms and Failed Hegemony*, John Chalcraft's *Popular in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, and Maha Abdelrahman's *A Long Revolution*.²² Each of these texts approaches the 2011 revolution through Gramsci's concept of hegemony, albeit with different focuses.

While I share the same assumptions and mirror many of the conclusions reached in these works, the overarching aim of this book is to engage in the debates discussed above by exploring how Gramsci's concepts travel to the particular postcolonial context of Egypt. I am thus interested not only in engaging with these concepts, but also in tracing this process of travel, and in bringing in other theorists such as Fanon and various Arab Marxists in conversation with Gramsci. This in turn raises questions such as how postcolonial theory addresses questions of political economy through the 1952 and 2011 revolutions; how postcolonial contexts open up new ways of understanding Gramsci's concepts; and how this process of stretching Gramsci in the context of Egypt opens up new avenues of research on Egypt and the broader Middle East. Above all, this book is greatly indebted to Adam Hanieh's *Lineages of Revolt* and Nazih Ayubi's *Overstating the Arab State*,²³ both of which opened my eyes to the importance of a critical political economy analysis of the Middle East, and the centrality of capitalist expansion to the contemporary political moment in contexts such as Egypt.

The story of 2011 does not have a clear beginning, but there are particular moments during which a number of conditions materialized and came together, producing change. One such moment can be

²² See Pratt (2007) for a Gramscian analysis of Egypt pre-2011. See also Chalcraft 2016; Fahmy 2011 and El Shakry 2007.

²³ As well as many other texts these authors have written.