

Prelude to the Revolution.

Independent Civic Activists in Mubarak's Egypt and the Quest for Hegemony

Gennaro Gervasio, Università Roma Tre - gennaro.gervasio@uniroma3.it

Andrea Teti, University of Aberdeen - a.teti@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article explores whether, in the decade preceding the 2011 uprising, Egypt's Independent Civic Activists (ICAs) can be considered organic intellectuals in terms of Gramsci's well-known definition. To do so, three aspects of 'organicity' with respect to subaltern groups are identified: a 'demographic' dimension, namely their embeddedness within subaltern groups; an 'ideological' dimension pertaining to their ability to correctly identify the problems affecting subaltern classes; and a 'cognitive' dimension, i.e., whether ICAs had managed to gain at least partial recognition from subaltern groups as providing political leadership. During the pre-2011 period, ICAs can be shown to be partly – but not fully – 'organic' intellectuals with respect to Egypt's subaltern groups. Examining ICAs' evolving mobilisation, it is also possible to both discern the embryonic emergence of a counter-hegemonic project well before 2011, and by contrast the substantial continuity between the regime and the Ikhwan. Finally, the article notes that the Egyptian regime under Husni Mubarak appeared unable or unwilling to address the root causes of dissatisfaction through anything other than palliative measures, leaving it not so much stable as fierce and brittle, vulnerable in precisely the same ways ICAs capitalised on in the run-up to the 'January 25th Revolution'.

Keywords: Egypt, 2011 Uprising, Civic Activism, Gramsci, Subaltern, Intellectuals.

1 Introduction

The past decade has produced a rich literature assessing Egypt's January Uprising of 2011 (Stacher 2020; Marfleet 2016; Ketchley 2017; Teti and Gervasio 2011; Armbrust 2019). Over the years, early optimistic assessments that revolution or at least a semblance of democracy might be achieved faded, replaced by a literature which either returned to emphasising the resilience of authoritarianism, or which emphasised would-be revolutionaries' failures. There has also been a considerable debate over the usefulness of Gramscian approaches in analysing the Uprisings and regional politics generally (e.g. De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Ayubi 1996; Achcar 2016; Munif 2013; Gherib 2017; De Smet 2016; Bayat 2017; Abdelrahman 2014; De Lellis 2018; Chalcraft 2016).

This article contributes to both strands of research. It draws on Gramsci's concepts of subalternity and organic intellectual in such a way as to return a measure of agency to Egypt's Independent Civic Activists (ICAs), and in so doing contributes to providing a more balanced assessment of the possibilities and practices of an emerging opposition movement as it began to formulate an alternative to the regime during the 2000s.

The article operationalises the concept of an organic subaltern intellectual by exploring three dimensions of ICAs' relationship to the subaltern classes they aimed to represent: their demographic embeddedness within those groups; their ability to both correctly diagnose the fissures in the Mubarak regime and identify the interests of subaltern groups; and whether ICAs received recognition from subaltern groups of their leadership role.

Analysing the evolution of ICAs before President Mubarak's removal shows that during the pre-2011 period ICAs were emerging as organic intellectuals of the subaltern groups they intended to represent. They were embedded within those classes, correctly diagnosed their concerns and the regime's contradictions, and while recognition from within subaltern groups was partial and episodic, ICAs were nonetheless receiving sufficient support to begin building a nationwide organisational reach and recognition from subaltern groups.

This approach to pre-revolutionary political dynamics through subalternity and 'organicity', in turn, makes it possible to both discern the embryonic emergence of a counter-hegemonic project before 2011, and specifically to distinguish in what senses ICAs' hegemonic project was radically different from the regime's, Islamists', and indeed liberals'. While the latter aim to replace regime elites or certain practices while leaving the regime's basic logic intact, ICAs' political programme entails a different form of power and hegemony entirely.

Finally, the article notes that the Egyptian regime – under Mubarak, and now under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – displays ongoing structural weaknesses, being unable or unwilling to address the root causes of dissatisfaction through anything other than a combination of repression and the paroxysmic intensification of nationalist rhetoric to stigmatise the opposition. These measures, effective though they may be in the short term, are unable to resolve the structural causes of dissatisfaction, namely the combination of economic and political marginalisation papered over by corruption and repression. This leaves the regime not so much stable as fierce and brittle, vulnerable in precisely the same ways ICAs capitalised on in the run-up to the ‘January 25th Revolution’.

2 Analytical Framework: Subaltern(ity), Civil Society, and Independent Civic Activists

Gramsci's use of ‘*subalterno*’ has received extensive attention (e.g. Green 2002; Liguori 2011; 2016; Thomas 2018).¹ Without intervening in either philological or theoretical scholarship, and with the necessary caveats around claiming interpretations of Gramsci's thought (e.g. Brennan 2013; Green 2011, 2002), we are interested here in its relation to the concept of the ‘organic intellectual’, and in three specific dimensions of Gramsci's use of ‘subaltern’ as a noun in relation to social groups or classes: marginality, difference, and the role of subalternity in the (re)production of relations of class domination/hegemony.

Gramsci opens Notebook 25's *Criteri Metodologici* stating “[t]he history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented [*disgregata*] and episodic” (Gramsci 1971, 54–55; Q25 §2; emphasis added)², emphasising elsewhere both this continuously fragmentating action of capital upon subaltern groups, and its centrality to the material dimension of capitalism. Gramsci also points out that subaltern groups displayed internal differentiation, being “ranked [*gerarchizzate*] according to their economic position *and homogeneity*” (Gramsci 1996, 52; Q3 §48; emphasis added). Finally, in his analysis of the *Southern Question* Gramsci shows how this combination enables relations of class domination and is sustained by ‘prejudices’ which lead subaltern groups to misidentify their class allies as political enemies, making for particularly recalcitrant obstacle for a workers’ movement to overcome (Gramsci 1978, 379–99; see also Q19, §24). Alongside capitalist economics, ‘Civil Society’ is the principal vehicle for and locus of the reproduction of these political and economic relations.

Gramsci's analysis of how subaltern classes might resolve this exploitative condition is fairly well-known and requires at a minimum that a coalition must be built across subaltern groups with its own organic intellectuals and an alternative civil society. An 'organic intellectual' of subaltern classes is one for whom "the relationship between intellectuals and people-masses, between the leaders and the led, between the rulers and the ruled is based on an organic attachment in which impassioned sentiment becomes understanding and hence knowledge (not mechanically but in a living manner)" (Gramsci 1996, 173; Q4, §33): only then will such intellectuals be truly representative of subaltern groups, and only in that case can one speak of a 'historical bloc'.

Gramsci's 'civil society', of course, does not coincide analytically or empirically with its homonym in orthodox liberal approaches in Political Science. In the latter conception – as a 'sphere' separate from the state, from the economy and from politics which is the repository of 'civic virtue', and as such can counterbalance the state's authoritarian impulses and thus defend democracy or help achieve it – 'civil society' both as a category of analysis and the activists it empirically designates has been central to the policy and scholarly debate about the possibility of democratic transitions and the resilience of authoritarianism in the Arab MENA region (for exemplars, see Hinnebusch 2006; Cavatorta and Durac 2011). However, there is by now an extensive literature showing there is nothing necessarily virtuous or even democratizing about such civil society, either as a taxonomical category or as really-existing groupings. Camau (2002) noted the way in which 'civil society' as a taxonomical category is supposedly separate from but actually actively deployed in politics (see also Mitchell 1991; Teti 2012), while Abdelrahman (2004; 2007) shows that authoritarian regimes seek to control 'civil society' and undermine independent activism.³ A similar effect is produced by international organisations and civil society (Pogodda 2020; Carapico 2013b, 2002).

Gramsci makes sense of this conundrum by showing that the distinction between 'state', 'civil society' and 'political society' is entirely artificial, and that it is itself part of mechanisms which reproduce capitalist relations of class domination. He notes that 'civil society' is an emanation of dominant classes, and that, as shown in his analysis of the *Southern Question*, it saturates a population's semiotic horizon with divisive 'prejudices' which support the exploitation of those classes. Dominant classes' preponderance within this non-state sphere makes it so impermeable that revolutionary movements must engage first and foremost in a 'war of position' to build an alternative 'civil society' within which subaltern groups might avoid dominant classes' propaganda. If capitalism produces material divisions, civil society

helps maintain them by inducing subaltern classes to misidentify the cause of their oppression. As Buttigieg (1995, 3) puts it: “civil society, far from being inimical to the state, is, in fact, its most resilient constitutive element”. For these reasons, this article follows Carapico’s (2013a) suggestion to use ‘civic activist’, coining ‘Independent Civic Activist’ (ICA) to designate activists independent of and opposed to the regime who are not part of the formal party political sphere, and whose project is counter-hegemonic.⁴ In Egypt, this identifies in particular a category of organisations often collectively referred to *al-huqūqiyyūn*, human rights organisations which consistently signed and authored collective statements denouncing human rights abuses.⁵

3 ICAs as Organic Intellectuals of Subaltern Groups

Based on the above, we propose that whether ICAs can be considered ‘organic intellectuals’ in relation to subaltern groups can be explored along three distinct dimensions. First, a ‘sociological’ dimension, namely whether ICAs emerge from and remain embedded within those subaltern classes. Second, an ‘ideological’ dimension, i.e., whether ICAs were able to correctly diagnose the contradictions internal to the (Mubarak-era) regime, and more specifically, the degree to which there was convergence or divergence between activists and public opinion – or more precisely subaltern groups – in their analyses of the key themes or issues relevant to those constituencies, such as the disaffection with the regime, priorities for the people and the nation, and specific issues such as social justice, conceptions of democracy, etc., (See their political analyses of corruption, work, social justice, elite self-interest, etc.). Finally, a ‘cognitive’ dimension: whether ICAs’ leadership of those subaltern groups was *recognized* as such from within the groups themselves: as Gramsci suggests, ‘ordinary’ members of subaltern groups must also ‘accept on the basis of understanding’ (e.g. Gramsci 1996; Q4, §33) those leaders and their political project.

3.1 Sociological Dimension: Class Background and Embeddedness

Most individual ICAs/leaders certainly emerged from subaltern groups and were for the most part not internal to Egyptian elites in either background or socialization.⁶ Activists such as Khaled ‘Ali, Kamal ‘Abbas, Kamal Abu ‘Ayta, Saber Barakat, Wael ‘Abbas, and many others usually came from relatively modest lower-middle class backgrounds and obtained degrees from (free) public universities, especially Cairo University, whereas those emerging from

expensive private institutions such as the American University in Cairo (AUC) were relatively fewer and far between (e.g. Hossam Bahgat, Gigi Ibrahim, etc.). Bayat defines this category of activists as “middle class poor” (Bayat 2015, 35), since they live often in poor areas. This ensures a daily contact with “marginalised urban poor’s deprivation and rage” (Bayat 2015, 35) which, as well as driving them to better their own position, keeps them familiar with the predicament of subaltern classes. Conversely, while these ICAs were emerging, the focus and base of Brotherhood elites shifted to the upper-middle class during the 2000s (El-Ghobashy 2005).⁷

3.2 *Ideological Dimension: Political Projects and Collective Concerns*

In order to represent subaltern groups – or at least be *able* to represent them in principle – an intellectual (class) must at a minimum reflect those groups’ concerns and interests and be capable of articulating a counter-hegemonic vision with these at its core. In order to hope to articulate such a project, those interests must first be identified. It is therefore necessary to ask whether ICAs had correctly diagnosed the regime’s internal contradictions, and whether these diagnoses resonated with the subaltern groups they intended to represent. To do this, it is useful to focus in turn both on the groups themselves and on their counterparts. This contrast will cast into better relief the characteristics displayed by ICAs and their significance in the Egyptian political landscape.

To a significant degree, ICAs had identified a series of key issues which were of concern to the general population. This can be seen in various ways. At a superficial, heuristic level, throughout the 2000s the keywords of ICAs’ analyses and activism matched very closely what would become the most popular slogans (Al-Masaeed 2013; Clarke 2013) under which people protested against the regime during the ‘18 Days’ and the ‘Long Revolution’ of 2011 (see Ryzova 2020). Beyond this entirely anecdotal point, however, there is a wealth of both direct and indirect evidence of this resonance of concerns. Beyond the by now extensive literature on Egypt’s labour movements and organisations, we consider here evidence emerging from extensive fieldwork over several years with key Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and ICAs, and indirect evidence from public opinion surveys. Essentially, both converge over a small number of key issues, particularly corruption and social justice: the core themes/issues which ICAs had concentrated their analysis and activism on are precisely the ones one finds as

the principle causes which led people to either actively participate in or passively support the January 2011 uprising.

The principal focus of independent civil society and civic activists was on themes such as labour rights (pay, conditions, etc. both urban and rural), social justice, corruption, police abuse, women's rights, and child labour (Beinin and Lockman 1987; El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009; Beinin 2015; 2009). The general thrust of this literature is confirmed by a wealth of qualitative evidence emerging from interviews, participant observations, and semi-ethnographic work by researchers. Our own experience confirms this. For example, according to ICAs, the Egyptian regime operates based on a mix of repression, corruption, and to a lesser degree co-optation,⁸ layered over which is the insistence from the Egyptian government and donor countries and institutions (IFIs) on weakening worker protections (including protection of pay and job security), dismantling welfare support (especially out-of-work support), and undermining unionisation – including importing agricultural labour, shift differentiation in factories, union-busting legislation.⁹ Indeed, one labour leader claimed that by pressing for privatisations, “the US and the EU create the very conditions which we have to fight against.”¹⁰ It is important to acknowledge that there was a fine and often fuzzy line between a ‘narrow’ and ‘apolitical’ fight for pay and conditions and the explicit conceptualization of these standards as (human) rights. While some leaders believed still in 2009 that most striking workers thought in terms of the former, another leader clearly stated that the privatisation of “gas, water, electricity, etc. are considered ‘services’ in the West, *they are considered human rights here.*”¹¹ According to other ICAs, the dramatic trajectory of Egypt's ‘January Revolution’ itself demonstrates that activists’ conception was more in line with the wider people's demands than with the EU's conception of democracy and transitions towards it.¹²

What we find is that public opinion surveys match these concerns quite closely. Public opinion surveys in the Middle East are sometimes dismissed by regional experts as unreliable insofar as they are conducted in authoritarian contexts (for a review, see Abbott et al. 2017). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that in Egypt the most methodologically reliable surveys – e.g., Arab Barometer, World Values Survey – show consistently that both popular concerns and the causes of (active or passive) support for the 2011 Uprising focus on corruption and issues pertaining socio-economic rights (social justice).

Corruption was the single most significant factor which led people to passively or actively support the January Uprising (Sapsford et al. 2019) with economic inequality – unemployment, poverty, inflation, etc., a close second (Abbott and Teti 2017). The perception

of corruption is nothing short of dramatic. In 2014, barely 11.6% think state agencies are *not* corrupt; 32% think private sector business are not corrupt; a huge 82% think it is difficult to get a job without ‘connections’; and perhaps most significant of all, a mere 14% think the government is making a concerted effort to crack down on corruption (Teti et al. 2020, 229–30). The perception of the economic situation is no less dire: only 29.9% of people thought the economic situation was good or very good; 31.8% thought the government’s performance managing the economy was good or very good; 14.5% felt its performance reducing economic inequalities good/very good; only 31.2% felt their household income covered expenses; and only 9.3% felt the government’s performance keeping inflation down was good or very good (Teti et al. 2020, 229–30). And while overt questions about trust in government tend to receive somewhat higher scores, these plummet to drastically low levels when people are asked about the ‘bread and butter’ of government, namely the delivery of basic and essential services like healthcare or education (Abbott and Teti 2017).

Considering that, if indeed critics of regional public opinion surveys are correct in claiming surveys are unreliable because people tend to self-censor in fear of their own safety, then these results present a minimum likely to be exceeded in reality – which only strengthens our claim of convergence between public opinion and ICAs on this count.

As such, in this instance at least, comparing the themes ICAs concentrated on with popular concerns such as these emerge from survey data provides a useful indirect way of assessing how closely ICAs’ activities – both analysis and campaigning – echoed subaltern classes’ concerns, particularly as these are the very same which drove support and participation in the 2011 uprising.

Another indirect measure of the degree to which ICA campaigns crossed regime ‘red lines’ and resonated with public opinion – and worried the Egyptian government for precisely that reason – is offered by US Embassy cables. One cable reports on the extent of corruption (US Embassy Cairo 2007), noting that the “privatization and economic opening of recent years have created new opportunities for ‘vertical corruption’ at upper levels of government” (4. C) and that, consequently, “enticements to corruption now exist everywhere from high-level state concessions to police officers on the street” (5. C) from teachers to small-to-medium businesses, from Parliamentarians to the Ministry of Defence (par. 5-8) and the President’s family itself (9).¹³ Nor is corruption something the population cares little about: the cable indicates that concern is widespread¹⁴ (9. C), permeating popular culture, including “the most widespread account of high-level corruption in recent years was in a work of fiction – the

wildly popular 2002 novel *[The] Yacoubian Building*" (9. C) which clearly contained a critique of high-level regime corruption.

That the regime was sensitive about corruption – and that therefore researching and even speaking about corruption was a highly-charged political act – is clear, so much so that the cable the “press to avoid[s] direct associations between President Mubarak and corruption charges” (11. U), while those who raise the issue “have often found themselves the target of corruption charges from the government and pro-government media commentators” (17. SBU).

In this context, the cable notes that “[c]orruption is a favorite target of the opposition” (12. U) and “receiving renewed attention from civil society activists” (1. SBU), while another cable is entirely dedicated to a Kifaya report on corruption (Kifaya 2007). While ‘not a systematic study’, the cable notes that the report’s aim is to raise awareness among and provide information to a concerned population. The report focuses on politically sensitive corruption practices associated with the regime: nepotism and clientelism in the public sector including the police; police abuse, including torture; corruption in the judiciary, press, education and health sectors, and in allocation of lands and housing; misappropriation of armament commissions (central to the Army’s economic empire); prostitution rings linked to high-level government figures, election rigging, and the use of emergency legislation to repress dissent (US Embassy Cairo 2006).

Whether Kifaya or any other individual actor or initiative were ‘successful’ or not, it is difficult to argue that there was not a strong congruence between ICAs’ actions and popular concerns, that ICAs were correctly diagnosing the country’s problems, and that these issues were not explored with the consciously political objective of opposing the regime and mobilising the population at large.

The evidence of both the scale of corruption and how much people cared about the issue can be seen in a number of other ways as well. For example, barely two months after Mubarak’s removal, roughly 6,000 corruption cases had been launched, with a flood of evidence from courts and local *tathīr* (cleansing) campaigns disseminated through new independent media which testified to the scale of crime at the heart of the regime (Marfleet 2013, 128). Eventually both Gamal Mubarak and Ahmad ‘Izz – key symbols of that regime – were tried. More broadly, corruption and regime abuse of power were a concern to producers and consumers of both ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, new and old media, spanning literature, cinema, ‘new media’ and

conventional news publishing. 'Alaa al-Aswany (*The Yacoubian Building*, 2002) and Khalid al-Khamissi (*Taxi*, 2006) established themselves as leading intellectuals of the new pro-democracy movement, first supporting the campaign against *tawrīth*, then campaigning for Muhammad El-Baradei.¹⁵ Alongside them, younger authors including Ahmad al-'Aidi (*Being 'Abbas al-'Abd*, 2003) and 'Issam Yusuf (*Quarter gram*, 2008) also emerged, reflecting the widespread disaffection which would be the backdrop to the 2011 uprising. In addition, pan-Arab satellite media such as Al-Jazeera, an embryonic process of debate on state press, and the private press all helped convey a different range and type of information, alongside the powerful symbolism of critical discussion in itself (Sakr 2013). The most important examples in this sense were the broadly liberal *Al-Misrī al-Yawm* (The Egyptian Today) that became the country's most-read paper within three years of its establishment in 2004, and the leftist *al-Badīl* (The Alternative), which during its brief existence (2007-2009) emerged as the voice of the independent workers' movement, as an important link between different movements, e.g., regularly publishing editorials on contemporary political issues by the best-known opposition leaders and many older and younger intellectuals (Ghiglia 2015).

Nor would it be accurate to characterise the activities of ICAs as merely episodic, marginally significant, apolitical or focused on single issues. Certainly, some ICAs themselves believed before 2011 that Egypt – and specifically the workers' movement – was not ready to sustain a national campaign for political change as they lacked both nationwide organisational structures and 'political consciousness'. However, it is also true that ICAs had been active throughout the 2000s: the mobilization over the previous decade was far from entirely unsystematic or 'spontaneous'. That mobilisation focused on attempting to expand the reach and strengthening the depth of capacity of 'worker service provision', i.e., on expanding unionisation and increasing coordination between unions and sectors.¹⁶ In the wake of the Tunisian revolution, a constellation of movements coming together in early January 2011 to call for the removal of Interior Minister Habib al-Adli (January 25th) and then – given the unprecedented strength and nationwide breadth of protests – for the downfall of the regime itself (January 28th).

This decade-long mobilisation, which has its roots in the workers' movement on the one hand, and in the post-Nasserist left on the other, was complex and certainly not without its internal splits and contradictions. However, recounting the main events and organisations in this trajectory of mobilisation helps clarify the focus of ICAs activities, their relation to popular concerns and to the regime, to what extent these groups were attempting to coordinate and

extend their reach nationwide – and thus to what degree ICAs can be regarded as organic to subaltern groups and as representing a counter-hegemonic politics.

The post-Nasserist left, mostly urban intellectual activists, set up Egypt's first Centres (*marākiz*), which played a crucial role in the run-up to 2011 (Gervasio and Teti 2014; Abdelrahman 2014). These organisations attempted to establish a culture of reform, monitor and pursue human rights, cross red lines and probe interstices left open by the regime, learning to use the spaces such a regime must leave partly open – e.g., the judiciary and the law – if it is to attempt to present a democratic façade (Galāl 2005). This applies to organisational form itself; some of these groups, for example, were established as CSOs, others as law firms or think tanks because the CSO legislation (e.g., registration processes) was being used to suffocate or co-opt independent CS groups.

The workers' movement took on different forms. The establishment of independent trade unions began with the Real Estate Tax Authority employees' union, in December 2008, headed by Kamal Abu 'Ayta (e.g. Al-Mīrghānī 2012), and gained a considerable amount of attention from scholarship and policymakers. However, organisations whose purpose it was to defend workers' rights but that were not formally unions date back much earlier. These workers' rights groups often, like the *huqūqiyyūn* human rights organisations, also took the form of legal firms. The best example of this is the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS, *Dār al-khadamāt al-niqābiyya wa-l-'ummāilyya*) established in 1990 in Helwan. Established as a law firm for the kinds of reasons described above, its focus was clearly on workers' rights, *de facto* anticipating the emergence of independent trade unions by nearly two decades. At the same time, while it, like unions, was cautious about overt involvement in politics – not least for tactical reasons – for workers' organisations the overt politicisation of protest was one of the regime's 'red lines', and alliances with weak and co-opted parties offered little advantage (Abdalla 2020, 160–63). It was always aware of the political dimensions, significance and implications of its work. Indeed, politics was present at its very birth, having been established by worker activist Kamal 'Abbas and old Communist militants like the late Yusuf Darwish and Nabil al-Hilali. CTUWS and similar groups were an adaptation to a combination of government repression of worker activism around 1989 and lack of support from established formal structures like ETUF.¹⁷ Some organisations like the *Markaz al-Ard* headed by Karam Saber Ibrahim worked to claim and defend agricultural workers' rights, whereas the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC) headed by Saber Barakat worked on human rights and workers' rights, in particular.

The history of the 2000s is one of increasing frequency of protest, increasing breadth and depth of organisations calling for 'change' (*taghyīr*), and increasing coordination between such groups across the ideological spectrum (including progressive elements among Islamists). Often forgotten because of the events of September 11th, 2001, the previous day a demonstration was held in Cairo's Tahrir Square against the government's *de facto* support for Israel's occupation organised by the People's Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada. This event flagrantly violated the regime's 'red line' against anti-regime protest, did so in the country's symbolic heart, it brought together an older generation of militants and newly-mobilised younger activists, and was an attempt to overcome the split between secular and Islamists activists (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). Over the following two years (2002-03), the movement against the invasion of Iraq helped forge a new protest culture, including younger urban middle-class activists being exposed to repression for the first time during a running battle which took place in March 2003 in Cairo's Tahrir Square. By 2004, the effect of neoliberal economic 'reforms' and the experience of harsh repression helped shift protests from being nominally focused on Arab regional issues to protests overtly directed at the regime and at the President. *Shayfeenkom!* (We See You!), for example, focused on corruption (2005). Established in 2004/05, the Egyptian Movement for Change (*al-Haraka al-misriyya min ajl al-taghyīr*, aka *Kifaya!/Enough!*) was aimed at Husni Mubarak, his son and likely successor Gamal, and the elites around him – particularly businessmen like Ahmad 'Izz –, and aimed to stop Mubarak's re-election in Egypt's first supposedly competitive presidential elections in 2005, and then *tawrīth*, the 'inheritance' of power by Gamal Mubarak, as well as campaigning against corruption as noted above (El-Mahdi 2009). Although ultimately unsuccessful, and despite not overcoming its internal divisions (see Sha'bān 2006), the Kifaya experience was significant because it successfully challenged the unspoken 'red line' around protesting against the President;¹⁸ was a laboratory for collaboration between different opposition groups – intellectuals, workers, students, feminists, secularists and Islamists, and many previously apolitical citizens –; and acted as a catalyst for a new Egyptian *intelligentsia* (El-Mahdi 2009; Duboc 2011).

Concurrently, independent workers' movements were becoming more assertive: 3,300 protests were registered over 1998-2009 (Beinin 2011, 181; Beinin and Duboc 2013), and there was a massive rise in workers' organisation and mobilization (Beinin and Duboc 2013; El-Mahdi 2009; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014).¹⁹ In 2008, massive, week-long strikes that took place in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the course of which, alongside employers, President Mubarak

was also explicitly targeted. While workers' unions often avoided explicit politicisation of their demands and were reluctant to cooperate with parties – which is understandable, given the way these were systematically co-opted – and with ICAs themselves, it is clear that such protests were taking on political significance. A symbol of how central workers' activism was to the opposition movement generally can be inferred from the way their struggles were adopted as icons of anti-regime protests – e.g., it was precisely in support of these struggles that the 'April 6th Youth' group was formed.²⁰ April 6th itself was also another 'experiment' bringing together ideologically diverse membership and leadership for a common purpose. Its two main leaders were Ahmed Maher from the liberal/left and Islamist Asma Mahfouz, but also included members from Kifaya and from the Revolutionary Socialists. The *Lagna Tansīhiyya* (Advisory Committee for Independent Workers) was also established in 2008, another coalition bringing together several ICAs and their organisations (Saber Barakat, Kamal Abu 'Ayta, Fatma Ramadan, etc.), and in particular bridging the urban-rural divide in an informal coordination body among workers' groups (before independent unions had been established).²¹ Indeed, Abu 'Ayta would establish the Tax Collectors' Union later that year (Abdelrahman 2014).

By 2010, Khaled 'Ali's ECESR (see below) – an HMLC offshoot – had become a hub for the opposition, centrally involved in all the principal experiences of organization against the regime over the years preceding the January Uprising, including the popular campaign launched in 2009/10 against the 'inheritance' of power from Mubarak *père* to *fils* (*al-Hamla al-sha'biyya didda al-tawrīth*), which later merged into the National Association for Change (NAC).

February 2010 saw the formal establishment of the NAC itself. Its figurehead leader was El-Baradei, but again it included leaders and organisations from across the spectrum of ICAs and labour organisations, e.g., Khaled 'Ali, Hassan Nafa' (coordinator of the campaign against *tawrīth*), Kamal Abu 'Ayta, Hamdin Sabbahi (initially), and Ahmad Baha' al-Din Sha'ban (leader of the Egyptian Socialist Party). The NAC experience is sometimes underestimated, possibly because the coalition was eventually not 'successful'. Yet for present purposes, it marked two important shifts: first, an organisation whose explicit purpose is to call for generalised political 'change', rather than single issue campaigns, and secondly, the shift from the 'negative' stance of previous campaigns and organisations (Kifaya; negative) to positive calls for political *change* (Magued 2020). Before then, often ICAs would be asked '*wa el-badīl eh?*' ('So, what is the alternative?'). The NAC was evidence that ICAs were trying to build trans-ideological coalitions to provide an answer to that question, calling for the socio-

economic and political inclusion which the regime had thrived on denying, i.e., for both socio-economic and civil-political rights and their actual implementation. The significance of these efforts was indirectly confirmed by a commensurate increase in police attention and violence, including clashes between Coptic students and police in autumn 2010. There was also clear evidence of ferment in the ICA sector and the feeling that mobilisation was moving into the explicitly political field, not least of which was the proliferation of meetings involving multiple ICAs and political forces (NWF, Revolutionary Socialists), or these being held at significant locations such as the Journalists' Syndicate.

An example of the NAC's explicitly political function was a meeting held in September 2010 with former IAEA director and Nobel peace laureate Muhammad El-Baradei at the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR) – which drew hundreds of activists, journalists, unionists, students and 'ordinary' citizens – to discuss the possibility of El-Baradei running as presidential candidate against Mubarak in what would have been presidential elections scheduled for 2011.²² The debate was hosted by its director Khaled 'Ali, who would later run as presidential candidate himself in 2012. ECESR was a young, dynamic NGO which acted as a catalyst for different opposition movements and as a *trait d'union* between these movements and aspiring political leaders. The ECESR was part of those *huqūqiyyūn* groups which saw themselves as research, monitoring and mobilization organizations and simultaneously, as a catalyst for anti-systemic protest movements. It aimed to be broadly inclusive, drawing membership and leadership from the Coptic minority and the 'reformist' tendency among Islamists as well.²³ Indeed, after scheduled parliamentary elections ended in early December 2010, a meeting was held at the Journalists' Union with several hundred attending discussing results of the elections, regime divisions, and in particular discussing the NAC and El-Baradei's potential presidential candidacy. These talks even included Brotherhood members who would later be linked to 'Abd el-Moneim Abu'l- Futuh, the socially progressive leader of the Brotherhood 'youth' who after the revolution was expelled from the Ikhwan and eventually ran in the 2012 presidential elections as an independent, coming a narrow fourth, within 7% of the winner and eventual President, Muhammad Morsi.²⁴

Correspondingly, ICAs sought to extend their influence. *Huqūqiyyūn* groups and workers' organisations began opening branches to support workers in other contexts and locations, and adapted to local needs.²⁵ The NAC also swiftly de-centralised and expanded its activities, especially contested traditionally Brotherhood-dominated areas in northern Egypt. By 2009, as a leading labour activist emphasised, ICAs were at the start of a positive project

which had broader concerns and objectives than 'simple' workers' struggles over pay and conditions, so much so that – as he noted – the regime had begun to harass ICAs much more frequently and systematically.²⁶ That they posed a political challenge to the regime well before 2011 had become clear (Shehata 2010).

While this ferment was under way, on June 6th 2010, the tortured body of Khalid Sa'id was found, killed by security forces for trying to publish a video criticising police corruption. His assassination generated widespread outrage after pictures of his body were published. His death came to epitomise the average citizen's powerlessness to oppose regime abuse. The Facebook page 'We Are All Khalid Sa'id' (*Kullunā Khālid Sa'īd*) created in his memory registered nearly half a million members in a few days, and immediately became a hotbed of debate over the need for change – i.e., to deal with the country's core problems: corruption and police abuse, and the denial of both social justice and political voice, including in the upcoming 2010 parliamentary elections.

3.3 *Cognitive Dimension: Recognition and 'Understanding'*

The third and final question is whether, during the pre-2011 period, ICAs were *organic* to those subaltern classes/groups they wished to represent by receiving recognition by subaltern groups themselves.

At first, it appears obvious that this 'acceptance' – particularly 'on the basis of understanding' – was absent, and that the bond between ICAs and subaltern groups *nationwide* was weak. One might accept that such recognition may have been present at specific points or in specific respects – e.g., the Khalid Sa'id affaire and Facebook group, or during the 'Eighteen Days', but the lack of a nationwide organisational infrastructure points to the weakness of any claim to this bond of recognition, 'sympathy' or 'understanding'.

Closer attention to the activities of ICAs in the run-up to the January 25th Uprising, however, suggests the situation was far from clear-cut. The increasing nationwide expansion and intensity of activities of ICAs, especially within independent unions and 'civil society', between 2008-10 has been well-documented and outlined above. Beyond the mere increase in activity of ICAs, this suggests that there was also increasing political ferment among working classes, and increasing mobilization of workers and their (informal) unions (Shehata 2010). There is also evidence of attempts by ICAs and their organisations to develop national organisations – whether unions or opposition groups – to extend their presence geographically,

in terms of capacity, and by networking to collaborate and coordinate more systematically, frequently, and intensively (Beinin and Duboc 2013; Weipert-Fenner and Wolff 2020).²⁷

However embryonic these attempts might have been, and however much they were caught off-guard by the Tunisian Revolution and unprepared for an uprising, these processes had nonetheless clearly begun. On the one hand, in December 2010 one could not speak of a systematic broad-based nationwide alliance of opposition groups nor the convergence of diverse actors. On the other hand, one also cannot deny that this alliance was precisely the project in the process of being formulated and built.

4 Assessment

The discussion above set out to examine Gramscian analysis of the causes and trajectories leading towards the January 2011 Revolution, namely the degree to which ICAs' relation to the subaltern classes they aimed to represent was organic. To do this, it explored ICAs' embeddedness in subaltern groups and their ability to reflect those groups' concerns and interests by articulating a counter-hegemonic vision, while receiving recognition from subaltern groups themselves.

The analysis presented here suggests ICAs be understood as 'organic intellectuals' on the first two criteria – class embeddedness and accurately diagnosing and representing class interests. On the third count, with the possible exception of specific periods or contexts such as the *Kullunā Khālid Sa'īd* group, full 'recognition' in strictly Gramscian terms was absent as ICAs were not fully organic insofar as they were unable to gain widespread, nationwide recognition from the groups they wished to represent as their leading intellectuals.

That being said, ICAs undeniably did have some national 'reach' and recognition (Magued 2020) and there were indications that this was growing. First, they initiated campaigns aiming to stimulate mass mobilisation, which resonated with the population at large, helping catalyse dissent. Indeed ICAs, were by the mid-2000s clearly organising a series of high-profile initiatives along the lines of the issues that concerned the population: the *Shayfeenkum* (we see you) and Kifaya (Enough) focused on corruption and electoral manipulation – where corruption would be the single biggest cause of support for the January 25th Uprisings. The anti-*tawrīth* campaign moved against Husni Mubarak's plan to allow his son Gamal to 'inherit' the presidency and crossed one of the regime's 'red lines', i.e., criticising

the Mubarak family openly. The *Kullunā Khālid Sa'īd* Facebook group also provided a platform to protest police corruption and brutality. All crossed the regime's 'red lines.'

Second, it is clear that the process of extending the breadth and depth of opposition was under way long before 2011. Notably during 2008-2010, ICAs increasingly attempted to network and coordinate, and the NAC experience disclosed the first – however embryonic – attempt to overtly enter the political arena and formulate an alternative political programme. Additionally, ICAs' socio-economic demands – e.g., eliminating corruption – went to the heart of the economic and therefore political system which the regime – Mubarak's and al-Sisi's, the Muslim Brotherhood, and regional and international powers supported. Although they did not formulate an explicitly revolutionary programme (or logistical infrastructure) their *demands* were revolutionary, and evidence suggests it is exceedingly unlikely that they were not aware of the radical implications of their actions. These experiences help explain, *inter alia*, what to outsiders appeared as the apparent 'suddenness' and 'unexpected' unity of anti-Mubarak forces during the '18 days' of the revolution (El-Ghobashy 2011).

Finally, it should be remembered that the appeal to protest on January 25th, National Police Day, was made by ICAs – Asma Mahfouz's well-known video appeal was made a week earlier – and the response to it suggests ICAs' appeal and the themes they had worked on for years resonated enough within subaltern groups to catalyse their discontent into protest. Perhaps it is more accurate to conclude that recognition was not so absent as it was in a still-embryonic phase of development, and that the revolution came too soon for that opposition to be prepared to meet its challenges.

5 Conclusion

This article explored whether Independent Civic Activists (ICAs) could be considered 'organic intellectuals' of Egypt's subaltern classes. To do so, three aspects of 'organicity' with respect to subaltern groups were identified: a 'demographic' dimension, namely their embeddedness within the subaltern groups they intended to represent; an 'ideological' dimension pertaining to their ability to correctly identify the problems affecting subaltern classes; and a 'cognitive' dimension, i.e., whether ICAs had managed to gain at least partial recognition from subaltern groups as providing political leadership. During the pre-2011 period, ICAs can be shown to be partly – but not fully – 'organic intellectuals,' partly falling short on the third count, but having undertaken a process which might have achieved their intended result.

Implications of this analysis can be identified at several levels: first, to reassess the possibilities and practices of ICA efforts to oppose the Mubarak regime during the 2000s; second, to apply Gramscian-inspired analyses to Middle East politics; and third, to draw on Italophone literature to contribute to a more organic application of Gramscian tools.

The empirical dimension of this contribution speaks to at least two issues: the (counter)hegemonic and revolutionary potential and intentions of ICAs, and the implications of the Egyptian regime's failure to address the long-term causes of economic and political marginalisation which provided the context for, inter alia, both ICAs' activism during the 2000s and, of course, the 2011 uprising itself.

Some of the debate about ICAs' 'revolutionary' potential, capability or intent turns on whether ICAs formulated an explicitly revolutionary plan, but in an authoritarian context such as Egypt's and at a relatively early stage of development of their 'logistical' strength and capability, this is perhaps an unrealistic expectation. Indeed, independent unions' strategy of avoiding alliances with parties and 'politicisation' generally is a result of a similar calculus of caution. However, by examining their activities, it is clear that ICAs' efforts to accurately diagnose the country's problems, to reflect subaltern groups' concerns, to mobilise those groups, and their increasingly explicit political nature had as ultimate implication – whether openly stated or not – to establish a nationwide pro-democratic opposition movement based on both socio-economic and political inclusion. In Gramscian terms, they were clearly engaged in a 'war of position'. The fact that these organisations were not calling for 'revolution' (*thawra*) but 'change' (*taghyīr*) most likely reflects the early stage of development of the opposition movement, but it should not distract from the radical nature of ICAs – or indeed independent unions' – objectives and activities in the context of Egypt's kleptocratic authoritarianism.

As for the analytical contribution of this piece, while it focused on the criteria for organic subaltern intellectuals, its implications are considerably broader. In particular, the analysis carried out here calls for a fuller exploration of subalternity, which along with hegemony is a concept both well-known in the Gramsci-inspired literature on Middle East politics and one which would benefit from a closer reading of both original sources and the rich Italophone literature. With all the necessary caveats about 'traveling theory' and philological depth, tools like subalternity, organicity, hegemony, civil society and historical bloc beg to be treated more systematically in Middle East Studies – as Gramsci did, for example, in his analysis of the *Southern Question*. In their 'organic' articulation, these tools have the potential to allow Anglophone scholarship to overcome the unrealistic dichotomy

between coercive domination and consensual hegemony and return to subaltern groups' their agency in all its contradictory complexity.

Finally, the analysis presented here confirms that as a result of a long-term impasse, Egypt's regime is unable to muster consensus, relying instead on a combination of repression, hyper-nationalism and xenophobia, which sustain only short-term consensus. This combination of its ideological vacuity, economic exploitation, and political repression makes for a regime that, despite a veneer of permanence which should not be confused with stability, is actually brittle and precarious. Conversely, it suggests that neither post-Mubarak regime elites nor the Brotherhood – whose aim is to replace the regime's elites rather than the regime itself – currently offer an alternative to the current system (*nizām*). From this perspective, only ICAs can be considered to have *counter*-hegemonic potential, seeking to replace the regime's core logic of exploitation. Such structural conditions – combining increasing economic marginalisation, political repression, and lack of alternatives – seem set to produce possibilities for dissent, organisation, and mobilisation, whether by current ICAs or new forces which might emerge in the near future.

6 References

- Abbott, Pamela, Roger Sapsford, Juan Díez-Nicloás, and Andrea Teti. 2017. *The Methods Handbook for the Political and Social Transformations in the Arab World Project*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.
- Abbott, Pamela, and Andrea Teti. 2017. "The Political and Economic Drivers of the 2011 Egyptian Uprising." *Arab Transformations Working Paper*, n. 6. The Arab Transformations Working Paper Series. Aberdeen. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-629X.1980.tb00220.x>.
- Abdalla, Nadine. 2017. *The Trade Union Movement in Egypt in Light of the 2011 Uprising: Cooptation, Containment and Limits of Resistance*. Beirut: American University in Beirut.
- Abdalla, Nadine. 2020. "From the Dream of Change to the Nightmare of Structural Weakness: The Trajectory of Egypt's Independent Trade Union Movement After 2011." In *Socioeconomic Protests in MENA and Latin America: Egypt and Tunisia in*

- Interregional Comparison*, edited by Irene Weipert-Fenner and Jonas Wolff, 145–68. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Abdelrahman, Maha. 2004. *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Abdelrahman, Maha. 2007. “The Nationalisation of the Human Rights Debate in Egypt.” *Nations and Nationalism* 13 (2): 285–300.
- Abdelrahman, Maha. 2014. *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings*. London: Routledge.
- Achcar, Gilbert. 2016. *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Al-Masaeed, Khaled. 2013. “Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and the Power of Its Slogans : A Critical Discourse Analysis Study.” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 9 (6): 1–6.
- Al-Mīrghānī, Ilhāmī. 2012. *Al-Niqabāt wa'l-huqūq Al-'ummāliyya fī Misr (Trade Unions and Workers' Rights in Egypt)*. Cairo: Development Support Centre.
- Alexander, Anne, and Mostafa Bassiouny. 2014. *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*. London: Zed Books.
- Armbrust, Walter. 2019. *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.
- Ayubi, Nazih. 1996. *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Bayat, Asef. 2013. “Egypt and Its Unsettled Islamism.” In *Post-Islamism: The Many Faces of Political Islam*, edited by Asef Bayat, 185–239. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Bayat, Asef. 2015. “Plebeians of the Arab Spring.” *Current Anthropology* 56 (11): 33–43.
- Bayat, Asef. 2017. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Beinin, Joel. 2009. “Workers' Protest in Egypt: Neo-Liberalism and Class Struggle in 21st Century.” *Social Movement Studies* 8 (4): 449–54.
- Beinin, Joel. 2011. “Workers and Egypt's January 25 Revolution.” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80 (1): 189–96.
- Beinin, Joel. 2012a. “Egyptian Workers and January 25th: A Social Movement in Historical Context.” *Social Research* 79 (2): 323–48.
- Beinin, Joel. 2012b. “The Rise of Egypt's Workers.” *The Carnegie Papers*. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/egypt_labor.pdf; last accessed 14/07/2020.

- Beinin, Joel. 2015. *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Beinin, Joel, and Marie Duboc. 2013. "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margins of the Global Neoliberal Order: 2004-2012." In *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Joel Beinin and Federic Vairel, 2nd ed., 205–27. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Beinin, Joel, and Zachary Lockman. 1987. *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.
- Brennan, Timothy. 2013. "Joining the Party." *Postcolonial Studies* 16 (1): 68–78.
- Buttigieg, Joseph A. 1995. "Gramsci on Civil Society." *Boundary 2*, 22 (3): 1–32.
- Camau, Michel. 2002. "Sociétés Civiles 'Réelles' et Téléologie de La Démocratisation." *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée* 9 (2): 213–32.
- Carapico, Sheila. 2002. "Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World." *The Middle East Journal* 56 (3): 379–95.
- Carapico, Sheila. 2013a. "Political Aid and Arab Activism: Conclusion." In *Political Aid and Arab Activism: Democracy Promotion, Justice and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carapico, Sheila. 2013b. *Political Aid and Arab Activism: Democracy Promotion, Justice and Representation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Cavatorta, Francesco, and Vincent Durac. 2011. *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World*. London: Routledge.
- Chalcraft, John. 2016. *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clarke, Killian. 2013. "Aish, Huriyya, Karama Insaniyya: Framing and the 2011 Egyptian Uprising." *European Political Science* 12 (2): 197–214.
- Clément, Françoise, Marie Duboc, and Omar El Shafei. 2011. "Le rôle des mobilisations des travailleurs et du mouvement syndical dans la chute de Moubarak." *Mouvements* 66 (2): 69–78.
- De Lellis, Francesco. 2018. "From Kamshish to Tahrir: The Left and the Peasant Question in Egypt in a Historical Perspective, 1952-2014." *Studi Magrebini* 16: 31–57.
- De Smet, Brecht. 2016. *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt*. London: Pluto Press.

- De Smet, Brecht, and Koenraad Bogaert. 2017. "Resistance and Passive Revolution in Egypt and Morocco." In *Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Towards a New Research Agenda*, edited by Cemal Burak Tansel, 211–33.
- Duboc, Marie. 2011. "La Contestation Sociale En Égypte Depuis 2004: Précarisation et Mobilisation Locale Des Ouvriers de l'industrie Textile." *Revue Tiers Monde* 5: 95–115.
- El-Ghobashy, Mona. 2005. "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37: 373–395.
- El-Ghobashy, Mona. 2011. "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution." *Middle East Report*, n. 258. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258/praxis-egyptian-revolution>; last accessed 13/07/2020
- El-Mahdi, Rabab. 2009. "Enough!: Egypt's Quest for Democracy." *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (8): 1011–1039.
- El-Mahdi, Rabab, and Philip Marfleet. eds. 2009. *Egypt: The Moment of Change*. London: Zed Books.
- Galāl, Shawqī. 2005. *Al-Mujtami' al-madanī wa thaqāfat al-islāh (Civil Society and the Culture of Reform)*. Cairo: Dar Merrit.
- Gervasio, Gennaro, and Andrea Teti. 2014. "Civic Activism and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution." In *Informal Geographies of Power in the Middle East*, edited by Gennaro Gervasio, Luca Anceschi, and Andrea Teti, 55–70. London: Routledge.
- Gherib, Baccar. 2017. *Penser La Transition Avec Gramsci. Tunisie, 2011-2014*. Tunis: Diwan.
- Ghiglia, Marianna. 2015. "Al-Badīl, Ou L'Alternative. Récit d'une Expérience à La Croisée Entre Journalisme et Engagement Militant." *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 12: 115–45.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1975. *Quaderni del carcere: edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*. Edited by Valentino Gerratana. Turin: Einaudi.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1978. *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926*. Edited by Quintin Hoare. London and Minneapolis: Lawrence and Wishart, and University of Minnesota Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1996. *Prison Notebooks. Volume 2*. Edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Green, Marcus E. 2002. "Gramsci Cannot Speak: Presentations and Interpretations of Gramsci's Concept of the Subaltern." *Rethinking Marxism* 14 (3): 1–24.
- Green, Marcus E. 2011. "Rethinking the Subaltern and the Question of Censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks." *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (4): 387–404.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2006. "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique." *Democratization* 13 (3): 373–95.
- Ketchley, Neil. 2017. *Egypt in a Time of Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kifaya. 2007. *Corruption in Egypt: The Black Cloud Is Not Disappearing*. Cairo: Kifaya Publications.
- Liguori, Guido. 2011. "Tre Accezioni Di 'subalterno' in Gramsci." *Critica Marxista* 6 (nov-dec): 33–42.
- Liguori, Guido. 2016. "Subalterno e Subalterni Nei 'Quaderni Del Carcere.'" *International Gramsci Journal* 2 (1): 89–125.
- Magued, Shaimaa. 2020. "Mobilization Structures and Political Change in an Authoritarian Context: The National Association for Change as a Case Study (2010–2011)." *Journal of North African Studies* 25 (1): 34–52.
- Marfleet, Phillip. 2013. "Mubarak's Egypt—Nexus of Criminality." *State Crime Journal* 2 (2): 112–34.
- Marfleet, Phillip. 2016. "The Political Subject in the 'Arab Spring.'" *Contemporary Levant* 1 (1): 4–11.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American Political Science Review* 85 (1): 77–96.
- Munif, Yasser. 2013. "The Arab Revolts: The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born." *Rethinking Marxism* 25 (2): 202–17.
- Naguib, Sameh. 2009. "Islamism(s) Old and New." In *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, edited by Rabab El-Mahdi and Phillip Marfleet, 103–19. New York: Zed Books.
- Pogodda, Sandra. 2020. "Revolutions and the Liberal Peace: Peacebuilding as Counterrevolutionary Practice?" *Cooperation and Conflict*. Advance online publication: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720921881>.
- Ryzova, Lucie. 2020. "The Battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Cairo: The Politics and Poetics of Urban Violence in Revolutionary Time." *Past & Present* 247 (1): 273–317.
- Sakr, Naomi. 2013. *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism: Media and the Arab Uprisings*. London: I.B. Tauris.

- Sapsford, Roger, Gerasimos Tsourapas, Pamela Abbott, and Andrea Teti. 2019. "Corruption, Trust, Inclusion and Cohesion in North Africa and the Middle East." *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 14 (1): 1–21.
- Sha‘bān, Ahmad Bahā’ al-Dīn. 2006. *Raffat Al-farāsha. Kifāya: al-mādī wa ‘l-mustaqbal (Beat of Wings. Kifaya: Past and Future)*. Cairo: Manshurāt Kifāya.
- Shehata, Dina. 2010. *‘Awdat al-siyāsa. Al-harakāt al-ihitijājiyya al-jadīda fī Misr (The Return of Politics: New Protest Movements in Egypt)*. Cairo: al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.
- Stacher, Joshua. 2020. *Watermelon Democracy: Egypt’s Turbulent Transition*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Teti, Andrea. 2012. "Beyond Lies the Wub: The Challenges of Post-Democratization." *Middle East Critique* 21 (1): 5–24.
- Teti, Andrea, Pamela Abbott, Valeria Talbot, and Paolo Maggiolini. 2020. *Democratisation against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Teti, Andrea, and Gennaro Gervasio. 2011. "The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings." *Mediterranean Politics* 16 (2): 321–27.
- Thomas, Peter D. 2018. "Refiguring the Subaltern." *Political Theory* 46 (6): 861–84.
- US Embassy Cairo. 2006. "Kifaya’s Report on Corruption in Egypt." Cairo. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06CAIRO4981_a.html; last accessed 14/07/2020.
- US Embassy Cairo. 2007. "Outreach To Egyptian Democracy And Human Rights Activists." Cairo. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08CAIRO941_a.html; last accessed 14/07/2020.
- Weipert-Fenner, Irene, and Jonas Wolff, eds. 2020. *Socioeconomic Protests in MENA and Latin America. Socioeconomic Protests in MENA and Latin America*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

¹ Gramsci scholarship, particularly in Italian, has usefully developed a complex systematic analysis of his conceptual toolkit. This article does not intend to simply 'apply' this toolkit to Egypt, or claim an unproblematic similarity between late 19th/early 20th century Italy and 21st Century Egypt – much less attempt to retrieve Gramsci's authorial intention. Rather, we believe that the exploration of the analytical opportunities offered by Gramsci's thought to the study of the region is far from concluded and we intend to make a modest contribution to this development by drawing on Gramsci's analysis as inspiration to devise adapted analytical tools useful for the context and task at hand.

² As indicated in the Introduction to the special section, we cite English translations of Gramsci's work but also provide a reference to the Italian original – following the international conventions of Gramsci Studies – indicating the Notebook ('Quaderno', Q) number and section symbol (§) identifying the paragraph number in the Italian critical edition (Gramsci 1975).

³ This scholarship is borne out in fieldwork by ICAs themselves: some are wary of using the rubric 'civil society' to cover all non-party organisations, arguing it is too broad a concept, while others distinguish between independent or activist NGOs and organisations whither established by regime directly (e.g., *Al-Gil*) or which end up being co-opted by it (e.g. *Al-Ard*), or again between 'human rights community' (*huqūqiyyūn*), referring to liberal and leftist pro-democracy organisations, and "assistance CSOs" indicating primarily Islamist charities (e.g. ICA2, 13/01/2009) and others still broaden the definition to the point of resembling Gramsci's own (e.g. ICA3, 15/01/2009).

⁴ Fieldwork for this article was conducted on several occasions and for extended periods during 2009-2013, and included several dozen interviews and participant observations by Gennaro Gervasio. The interviews referred to in this article constitute a small sample of extensive fieldwork conducted by Gennaro Gervasio, as well as interviews conducted jointly with Andrea Teti. While informed consent was obtained on each occasion, for the safety of interviewees their names have been anonymised here. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their role in relevant movements under analysis, and constitute a selection representative of opinions expressed by ICAs including ones not quoted here. After interviews were transcribed and analysed, identifying information was destroyed.

⁵ Specifically, during the period under examination here, this list includes the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Non-Violent Studies; Arab Network for Human Rights Information; Arabic Network for Human Rights (ANHRI); Arab Organization for Penal Reform; Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression; *Al-Intimā' Al-Watanī* Association for Human Rights; *Awlād Al-Ard* Foundation for Human Rights; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS); Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance; Egyptian Association for Enhancement of Community Participation; Egyptian Center for Housing Rights; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR); the Egyptian Center for Human Rights; Association for Human Rights Legal Aid (*al-Gam 'iyya lil-musā'da al-qanūniyya wa-huqūq al-insān*, AHRLA); the Hisham Mubarak Law Center (HMLC); Land Center for Human Rights (*Markaz al-Ard*); Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence; New Woman Foundation (NWF); One World Foundation for Development and Civil Society Care; Arab Network for NGOs.

⁶ Gervasio's interview with ICA2 (13/01/2010), ICA4 (02/02/2010), and ICA6 (16/06/2012).

-
- ⁷ Gervasio's interview with ICA10, 16/01/2010. See also (Bayat 2013; Naguib 2009).
- ⁸ E.g. Gervasio's interview with ICA4, 02/02/2010.
- ⁹ Authors' interview with ICA10, 12/01/2009.
- ¹⁰ Authors' interview with ICA2, 13/01/2009. Similar sentiments were expressed to Authors by ICA10 (12/01/2009) and ICA3 (15/01/2009), amongst others.
- ¹¹ Authors' interview with ICA2, 13/01/2009; emphasis added.
- ¹² Gervasio's interviews with ICA8, 01/08/2012; ICA6, 16/06/2012. See also Gervasio and Teti (2014).
- ¹³ Gervasio's interview with ICA9, 01/06/2012, who emphasised the lack of transparency on public contracts 'won' by the Army.
- ¹⁴ ICAs also confirmed this, noting the proportional increase of corruption which came with the rise of Gamal Mubarak and his "gang"; e.g. Gervasio interview with ICA11, 09/02/2010.
- ¹⁵ E.g. interview by the Authors with: ICA3, 15/01/2009; ICA9, 12/01/2009.
- ¹⁶ Authors' interview with ICA3, 15/01/2009.
- ¹⁷ Authors' interview with ICA3, 15/01/2009.
- ¹⁸ Gervasio's interviews with ICA7 (several occasions, 2009-12), and ICA12, 09/02/2010.
- ¹⁹ On the role of the workers during and after the Revolution see (Beinin 2012a; 2012b; Clément, Duboc, and El Shafei 2011; Abdalla 2017). Gervasio's interview with ICA3 (30/6/2012) confirms this trend.
- ²⁰ Gervasio's interview with ICA5, 08/02/2010.
- ²¹ Authors' interviews with ICA9, 12/01/2009; ICA2, 13/01/2009; and Gervasio's interview with ICA10, 16/01/2010.
- ²² In addition to such 'high-level' activities – campaigns and coordination –, the *huqūqiyyūn* also conducted frontline work such as training activities, which was also part of the process of building historical bloc and possibilities of *national* organizational reach.
- ²³ Gervasio's interviews with ICA2, 03/12/2010 and 03/03/2013.
- ²⁴ The meeting took place on 13/12/2010, Gervasio in attendance.
- ²⁵ Authors' interview with ICA3, 15/01/2009.
- ²⁶ Authors' interview with ICA3, 15/01/2009.
- ²⁷ Gervasio's interviews with ICA2, 13/01/2010; ICA10, 16/01/2010; ICA8, 09/02/2010; ICA1, 07/11/2010.