

BOOK REVIEW

Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter Revolution in Egypt by Brecht De Smet. London: Pluto Press, 2016. \$34.00 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978 0 7453 3557 5. Pages: 1 - 264.

Egypt: Contested Revolution by Philip Marfleet. London: Pluto Press, 2016. \$28.00 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978 0 7453 3551 3. Pages: 1 - 251.

Reviewed by Sara Farhan¹

The intense political and social convulsions in the Middle East, specifically the Tahrir demonstrations throughout 2011 and 2013 ignited academic debates with equal fervour. Yet, the current political calamities negated optimistic predictions. It is not surprising that a plethora of manuscripts on the Egyptian experience clung-on awkwardly to the ‘Arab Spring’ events and flood publishing houses and western media with optimistic theories in an effort to comprehend the events transpiring in Egypt. Yet, when reflecting on the two-year anniversary of the Tahrir demonstrations, Joel Beinin claimed in a *Jadaliyya* article that “The January 25 Revolution is not over. Rather, it has yet to occur” (Beinin, 2013). Even recently, when examining the social, political, and economic atmosphere, little has changed in post Mubarak Egypt. As such, Philip Marfleet’s *Egypt: Revolution Contested* and Brecht De Smet’s *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter Revolution in Egypt* are rare balanced studies within a flooded scholarship depicted Egypt’s social movements in either a hopelessly optimistic light or as a pessimistic warning of a grim future. Like Beinin, De Smet and Marfleet contend that the Tahrir demonstrations are components of a long negotiation process involving many social and political strata, a moment in Egypt’s revolutionary history, and is still underway.

In *Gramsci on Tahrir*, De Smet employs Gramscian theoretical framework to the 2011 and 2013 Tahrir demonstrations and their aftermath. Composed of two sections, *Gramsci on Tahrir*’s first segment is devoted to the contextualisation of ‘Passive Revolution,’ ‘hegemony,’ and ‘Caesarism’ concepts. The work then employs these frameworks to the developments of the social unrest in Egypt, arguing that passive revolution has been evident throughout the country’s history. The work is unique in that very few have attempted to apply Gramscian Caecerism to contemporary events in general, yet the social uprising of the Middle East. The author omits important moments in the Egypt’s history to fit the framework and concepts of the work, however. De Smet falls short when considering the agency and conflicting goals of actors involved in the various negotiations throughout Egypt’s nation-building process. The Egyptian workers’ experience is one of social unrest and mass mobilisations. As such the Tahrir demonstrations, however, are multifaceted and complex. These pressures were also lessons from which elites learnt to adapt, develop preventions models, and absorb potential opposition when it cannot be resisted, ignored, or negotiated with. De Smet traces social convulsions and the process of hegemony making and cementing to the interwar period when factories sprouted across urban centres permanently changing the social, cultural, political, and of course economic composition of Egyptians.

¹ Department of History, York University. Email: sfarhan@yorku.ca

While De Smet reflects on the history of hegemonies, passive revolutions, and Caesarisms; Philip Marfleet's *Egypt: Revolution Contested* focuses on the on-going process of social movements. Noting that accounts on what unfolded in Egypt fail to "predict a swift end to the protests," Marfleet asks: why did Egypt's social uprisings transpire in the patterns we witnessed? For well over two years' mass demonstrations impacted all aspects of Egypt's society. Egypt "was in a state of ferment as the mass of people sought solutions to their predicaments and greater control over their lives" (Marfleet, 2016, 14). In studying the events beginning in 2011 Marfleet contextualises the narratives of the demonstrations. He identifies key players, stakeholders, critical moments, and the broader implications of the mass demonstrations. Marfleet provides a detailed socio-economic composition of the demonstrators. He argues that the social movements have great implications that will continue to shape Egypt's political and socio-economic future. Relying on existing historiography on revolutionary Egypt as well as journalistic accounts and interviews with demonstrators and activists, Marfleet pens the accounts of the diverse composition of the movements. *Egypt* considers how contending classes and political currents have addressed demands for radical social and political transformation and how they have prepared to face the struggles to come.

Egypt contains valuable anthropological and sociological information that will be referenced in upcoming narratives on mass demonstrations in Egypt. In three segments, Marfleet begins with Making Revolution, a four chaptered examination of the space, actors, and composition of the demonstrations. He then summarises relevant moments in Egypt's history in a two chaptered segment titled, The Past in the Present. In this segment he emphasises certain continuities that are often contested amongst the academic community, such as the Free Officers movement and the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to influence. His final, and most important segment, Counter-Revolution is a four chaptered discussion of the Mursi experience, the Muslim Brotherhood's socio-economic composition, the lead-up to the 2013 coup, and the final outcome of the 'counter-revolution'. Marfleet provides a postscript in which he reaffirms his initial assertions that Sisi's visions for Egypt is a departure from the revolutionary narrative of Tahrir's demonstrators. Considering the changing and competing visions of Egypt's future, Marfleet would have only benefitted from Rienhart Kosselleck's (1981) "Historicity and the Planes of Modernity" as his main theoretical framework.

De Smet and Marfleet's arguments reaffirm one-another on the one-hand and contradict each other on the other. They hastily compartmentalise the history of the Egyptian experience. As such, Marfleet's attempt to understand whether the social uprising was revolutionary at all, is answered by De Smet when the latter argues that the country is well accustomed to mass demonstrations, but it is the means and techniques in which the existing elite absorb these shocks that is of dire importance and in deed of examination. Failing to historicise these important events ignores the continuities and discontinuities in Egypt's history. Therefore, Marfleet's work must be supplemented with a historical study in order to accentuate its strengths.

Incorporating a trans-regional analysis and comparative scope would have only strengthened De Smet's and Marfleet's arguments. For example, the increasing influence of the Islamic Phenomenon in Egypt had been catapulted by key figures within the Muslim Brotherhood

who were members of the elite and therefore had relative influence within that particular strata, thus access to state level ideological engines without dislodging the incumbent ruler. (Bayat, 1998). Despite the Muslim Brotherhoods temporary leverage, it is necessary for the academic community to reflect on the Islamic connotations of the mass movements in juxtaposition to the secular undertones of the Tahrir demonstrations. Unfortunately, with the rise of “Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt, enduring civil war in Libya and Syria, an aborted insurrection in Bahrain, etc.,” academics and scholarly commentators voiced concerns that “the region’s ‘spring’ was degenerating into an authoritarian ‘winter’” (De Smet, 2016, 73). These manifestations, however, highlight the heterogeneity of the mass demonstrations. Local level actors upheld various and often competing visions of what their future looked like.

Several conversations with Egyptian diaspora disclosed to this writer the degree of agency exercised by the demonstrators. Many were bribed with basic necessities such as food and daily allowances should they attend popular demonstrations that chanted Muslim Brotherhood slogans on the one-hand or military sponsorship on the other. (S. Farhan, Personal Communication, November12, 2015). Local level agencies and motives behind Tahrir square participation were neither homogenous nor unison. Both Marfleet and De Smet undermine local level actors’ agency in these demonstrations. Further, in asserting that the revolution is an on-going process, Marfleet challenges De Smet’s Caecerism framework. Marfleet underscores the roles of principal players and their changing relationships and interaction with each other as a useful tool for not only examining patterns of trajectory of the demonstrations, but also as means of predicting their outcome.

While the two authors’ competing examinations reveal that events are still transpiring and continue to shape Egypt, the region, and the global south, their failure to historicise the events as part of not only Egyptians’ struggle but regional unveil a narrow scope of conceptualising the Tahrir demonstrations. These events did not occur in a vacuum. Yet, De Smet’s Caecerist Egypt underscores the strength of existing elites and the cementation of the hegemonies through their ability to absorb opposition and normalise social convulsions, while Marfleet negates the end of the Tahrir’s revolutionary movement. *Egypt* revives the Tahrir demonstrations from its premature end at the pens of many academics and journalists. Marfleet, instead, outlines the testimonies of engaged actors who believe that the revolution is underway and its affects are still taking place in Egypt.

These two works agree that due to numerous social movements and organic crises in Egypt’s history, strong hegemonies employ passive revolutions in their effort to reproduce conditions of production. While Marfleet demonstrates that military interference was supported and viewed as a continuation of the revolution, or a “second revolution” (Marfleet, 2016, 202). De Smet contends that “[r]evolutions remained unfinished, or were smothered in the violence of counter-revolution” (De Smet, 2016, 73). As such, strong hegemonies are more likely to absorb opposition. In this manner, as Marfleet’s revolutionary Egypt continues to unfold, De Smet’s Caecerist Egypt’s strong hegemonies are undergoing lengthy negotiation processes. This is noted in how quickly some key players in the movements were to turn to existing political parties as a viable alternate for the existing *nizam*.

The authors conclude that it is difficult to assess the origins and composition of the Egyptian movements but it is easier to predict and interpret the counter-revolution and the resilience of the old regime (Marfleet, 2016, xiii; De Smet, 2016, 224) Yet, despite the authors' attempt to historicise these movements, they miss a critical element of the history of social unrest in Egypt. Egyptian demonstrations cannot be isolated from regional events. The Tahrir demonstrations are components of a historical moment that began following the 2003 American incursion into Iraq. This incident highlighted deeply seeded issues within the Arab-unity rhetoric and strengthened existing social movements in which various political actors and stakeholders hastened to align themselves with the demonstrators so as to secure an influential position when the dust settles. Indeed, the "Muslim Brotherhood.... secular liberals, nationals, and communists, and their relationships with the armed forces" must be considered when assessing the social movements of 2011 as well as the 2013 coup (Marfleet, 2016, XV).

Gramsci on Tahrir's conclusions heed warnings to Egyptians who are still struggling for change: that unless they form a cohesive oppositional barrier, utter collapse is eminent. The demonstrative resilience of Egypt's elite and the normalisation of mass demonstrations can be interpreted as the manifestation of De Smet's prediction. Marfleet's and De Smet's contributions add to the historiography of social movements and demonstrations in Egypt specifically. Welcomed additions to a course on contemporary Egypt, *Gramsci on Tahrir* provides both, a detailed expansion of theoretical Marxist theories and historical context to the contemporary events while *Egypt* reveals that the Tahrir movements were the beginning of a revolutionary process that is still underway. These two manuscripts pair well with Zachery Lockman's and Joel Beinin's *Workers of the Nile* for an upper undergraduate level or graduate seminar on the contemporary Egyptian worker's experience. Ultimately, De Smet and Marfleet encourage the academic community to continue the debate on the Tahrir demonstrations.

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