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TITOLO/TITLE: A Time and a Place for Gramsci: Sources, Contexts and Analytical Inspirations in MENA countries

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: Andrea Teti, Alessandra Marchi

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Antonio Gramsci is increasingly frequently cited in Anglophone scholarship on the Middle East (e.g. Achcar, 2013; De Smet, 2014, 2016; Chalcraft, 2014). These borrowings tend to coalesce around a disciplinary doxa which is sometimes only loosely related to its original source material, as the fate of the idea of 'hegemony' in the field of International Relations demonstrates (Cox, 1983; cf. Budd, 2013). The current revival in North African and Middle Eastern/South-West Asian Studies (MENA/SWANA) raises similar questions about the relationship between primary sources, historical and contemporary political contexts, and analytical innovation and adaptation.

The task facing Gramscian-inspired analysis in MENA/SWANA 'area-focused' scholarship is to flourish both in intellectual development and concrete analysis while navigating safely to avoid the two extremes of a purely philological focus and of decontextualised analysis. To do this requires a nimble weaving between historical contexts, careful textual analysis, and contemporary political realities.

At least two types of factors provide the current generation of scholarship with the opportunity to move beyond its predecessors, drawing upon two key advantages. First, the Arab Uprisings in 2010-11 and since 2019 mark a unique watershed and a new context in regional politics which invites re-examination not only of established truisms for the region itself (e.g. the authoritarian resilience vs. democratization debate) –, but have been source of both theoretical inspiration and political mobilisation well beyond 'the region'. Both within this 'region' and beyond it, the Uprisings provide a challenge for scholarship, for policy and for political organisation and action.

Second, Gramscian scholarship has flourished both in Italy and beyond the 'Anglosphere' building upon a recent growth in the publication of Gramsci's original writings in Italian as well as translations in several languages, including English. These studies provide philological, historical-contextual and theoretical tools developed by Italophone scholars on/of Gramsci. In combination with new English-language translations of Gramsci's work, these studies can become crucial sources of inspiration for Anglophone scholarship (e.g. Manduchi and Gervasio, 2021; Marchi and Chalcraft, 2021).

This wealth of analysis offers MENA/SWANA scholarship an opportunity to draw more richly on – but also speak to – original source material and theorisation both to better understand those sources, and to more robustly engage in the task of developing and adapting Gramscian analysis. Such scholarship, while finding inspiration in Gramsci's original conceptual toolkit and in the method or strategy behind his analysis, reflects upon and adapts those starting points on the basis of the specific characteristics of contemporary contexts (e.g. El-Sherif, 2015; Gherib, 2017).

In this vein, the panel discusses contributions combining an engagement with primary sources, contextual analysis and analytical engagement with aspects pertinent to the Arab Uprisings, their preceding mobilisations, their concrete praxis, and/or their ongoing implications.

Panel contributors explore key concepts and themes in Gramsci's thought by drawing on a

combination of primary sources and contemporary contexts. Each contribution focuses on a concept or thematic-analytical aspect of Gramsci's thought, and while paying attention to conceptual and philological-semantic dimensions, reflect upon how these might inspire analytical strategies to make sense of concrete contemporary issues.

Contributions drawing on secondary literatures in languages other than English, developing cross-regional and cross-disciplinary comparative outlooks, and/or on themes *beyond* already established 'canonical' aspects of Gramscian thought (e.g. hegemony, civil society, historical bloc or war of movement/position) are particularly welcome.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Andrea Teti is Senior Associate Editor of *Middle East Critique* and has held Visiting Professorships at the universities of Bologna (2020), Cagliari (2018), Ghent (2017/18) and Amsterdam (2015). He was Project Lead for the EU-funded Arab Transformations Project consortium (2015-16). He was co-editor with Gennaro Gervasio and Luca Anceschi of *Informal Power in the Greater Middle East* (2014) and lead author of *The Arab Uprisings in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia* (2018) and of *Democratization Against Democracy: How EU Policy Fails the Middle East* (2020). He also published several articles on EU policy in the Middle East, on conceptions of democracy, on Michel Foucault, and on the production of knowledge about the Middle East in Social Science.

Alessandra Marchi holds a PhD in Social Anthropology at the EHESS in Paris and is Research Fellow at the University of Cagliari, where she currently works at the GramsciLab – Centre for International Gramscian Studies, Department of Political and Social Sciences, on a project on the Gramscian readings of MENA countries. She recently co-edited the Special Issue "Gramsci in the Arab World", *Middle East Critique*, (Vol. 30, n.1), with John Chalcraft, in which she also published the article "Molecular Transformations: Reading the Arab Uprisings with and beyond Gramsci". Among her publications: A. Marchi, P. Manduchi (eds), *A lezione da Gramsci. Democrazia, partecipazione politica, società civile in Tunisia* (Carocci 2019); A. Marchi, P. Manduchi, G. Vacca (eds), *Gramsci nel mondo arabo* (Il Mulino 2017).

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PAPER 1: Patrizia Manduchi and Alessandra Marchi (Università di Cagliari) *Translations and Translatability of Gramsci's political lexicon in Arab countries*

Gramsci's thought has been present in the intellectual Arab debate at least since the Seventies, a period of political, social and cultural crisis in the MENA countries, through to the recent upheavals in 2011 and their aftermaths. The dissemination of Gramsci's lexicon is closely linked to the use of the language through which it is conveyed. This is particularly true in respect of the Arabic-speaking world, where terms, conceptual categories and theories borrowed from Gramsci went through a phase of considerable renewed popularity after the 2011 Uprisings.

The paper describes the various phases of the translation activity in Arabic language and, secondly, to focus on the difficulty of reception of Gramscian best known conceptual categories in the contemporary Arab political debate.

Awareness of Gramsci's thought in the Arab world came through the most widespread Western languages, and only later through translations into Arabic, most of which are indirect translations from English or French. Nonetheless, Gramscian concepts as Hegemony (*haymana*), Civil Society (*mujtama'a al-madaniyya*), Organic and Traditional Intellectual (*muthaqqaf 'udwiyyun/taqlīdī*), Passive Revolution (*al-thawra al-salbiyya*), Subalternity and subalterns (*taba'iyya / at-tābi'ūn*), Southern Question (*al-qadiyya al-janūbiyya*), and others are considered crucial keys to understanding various Arab socio-political issues in many different analytical fields. These loanwords have been part of Arabic-language political lexicons for decades, and not only among Leftist militants.

This paper therefore focuses on the Gramscian theoretical lexicon's translatability and the risks involved in the use of such loanwords. Our question is: beyond the circulation of Gramscian analysis in the Arab world, how is it possible to translate concepts as specific as those elaborated by Gramsci in his historical period and context, adapting them to the interpretation of such different political and social realities? The question of "translatability" arises for each context where Gramsci's thought is disseminated. We consider the concept translatability as having two senses here. Firstly, it refers to the difficult task of translating from a language to another (and even to a third, as is Gramsci's case). Secondly, it assesses the problems involved in translating Gramscian concepts from one context to another, since their wide diffusion has led to an excessive freedom of use (even though sometimes these new "uses" became new interpretative keys).

This notably means asking questions about translatability in the political field: Gramscian concepts mostly used some decades ago, have to be re-thought within the current historical and political context. The 2011 Arab Uprisings opened the way to a renewal of Marxist/Gramscian analysis to respond to the necessity of understanding how and why revolts have not yet achieved their goals. Our attention focuses then on the gradual – even molecular – transformations in the field of contentious politics and political subjectivities.

PAPER 2: Rossana Tufaro (Università di Roma La Sapienza) *Anatomies of an organic crisis (or aetiology of a thawra): a Gramscian reading of the Lebanese Uprising (2019-2020)*

In his seminal Prison Notebooks, Antonio Gramsci defined as organic crisis, or crisis of hegemony of the ruling groups, the condition whereby «social groups detach themselves from their traditional parties» which, in their given organizational form, «are not recognized anymore as an expression of their class of belonging, or fraction of class». This condition verifies – the Marxist philosopher adds – «or when ruling groups fail an important political mission for whom they demanded or imposed by force the consensus of large masses, either because large masses suddenly switch from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and rise claims that, taken in their disorganic entirety, constitute a revolution» [Q13(XXX); § (23)].

On October 17, 2019, the attempt of imposition of a new indirect tax ignited the largest popular uprising ever experienced in Lebanon's post-colonial history. The Uprising debuted as an exhausted popular outcry against the sharp deterioration of the country's economic conditions, to quickly escalate into a broader political upsurge questioning the self-serving management of the state resources by Lebanese ruling elites and demand, through a variety of claims, practices and solidarities, a radical redefinition of the existing sectarian neoliberal order on more equal and inclusive bases. The Uprising – or thawra, 'revolution', as labelled by the ensemble of actors who embodied it – cross-cut sectarian, regional, generational, and gender boundaries and found much of its propulsive force from the political activation of socio-geographical constituencies (rural and peri-urban areas, petty bourgeoisie of self-employed, urban proletariat) which had so far remained on the margins of the transgressive contention. This posed an unprecedented challenge to the authority of sectarian leaderships who, for the first time since the end of the Civil War (1975-1990), saw consistent portions of their historical constituencies revolting against their rule and demand their withdrawal from state power.

Building on the Gramscian notions of hegemony, organic crisis, and hegemonic incorporation, the following presentation aims at providing an alternative interpretation of the incremental dynamics of accumulation upon which the Uprising sedimented. In particular, by tracing back a genealogy of the dynamics of activation of the different socio-geographical and political constituencies who took the streets, the presentation contends that the political paternity of the Uprising does not need to be searched in the cycles of transgressive contention which crossed the country since the end of the Pax Syriana, but rather in the molecular transformations in the dominant sectarian relations triggered by the crisis of Lebanese neoliberal capitalism.

PAPER 3: Cherine Hussein (Institute of International Relations in Prague), *On Intellectuals and Building Transformative Conceptions of the World (A View from Palestine)*

It was the late Edward Said who once wrote, criticism “must see itself inhabiting a contested cultural space”; it must recognize that it is of this world, and “aspire to hegemony in Gramsci's sense of the word”; and is “an interventionary and directive phenomenon” that must remain linked with the realities of human life. Thus Said argues that the realities of power and authority—as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies—are the realities that make texts possible, and it is these realities that should be taken account of by criticism and critical consciousness.

In many ways, this view is an affirmation of the centrality of Antonio Gramsci's philosophy of praxis in elaborating revolutionary theory—a praxis which remains of this world, begins with human empowerment, and with the building of counterhegemony as a process of mapping spaces of power that can be territorially gained by an oppositionary collective with an alternative vision of social relations. It is also a revolutionary theory that centres its struggle for expansive hegemony within interlinked civil societies.

In this spirit, this paper explores the counterhegemonic activism of a selection of Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli single democratic state intellectuals against the hegemony of Zionism and separation—in the context of the demise of the two-state paradigm as a viable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It does this in an attempt to create a window into the processes of building counterhegemony through the conscious

activation of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis within the framework of a "philosophical movement" that is centered upon the launching of a project of critical pedagogy in interlinked civil societies. Focussing on the locations and self-understandings of these intellectuals—and their articulation of a revolutionary conception of the world—it aims to explore how the dynamics of transforming social and political relations was perceived as a strategy in this context; and to highlight its interlinked practice of re-inventing new selves and political possibilities on the ground. Linking this phenomenon of resistance to a political imagining of an emergent, revolutionary (Pan) Arab world—this paper will also reflect upon how its counterhegemonic potential was both empowered and hindered by the victories and defeats of the uprisings in the region.

PAPER 4: Sebastian Elsässer, University of Kiel (Germany), *The Muslim Brotherhood, its Organic Intellectuals and the Arab Uprisings*

I propose to analyse the current internal crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood – both in Egypt and in other Arab countries. I contend that the splits and defections that happened in recent years are not primarily a result of the deteriorating external conditions in this period of authoritarian restoration. Their main cause lies in long-term internal developments that have led to a gradual process of alienation between the organisation and a significant part of its most prolific and capable activists and members (its organic intellectuals).

To analyse these internal dynamics I will apply Antonio Gramsci's model of sociopolitical movements to the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially focusing on the concept of "organic intellectuals". Accordingly, the Muslim Brotherhood can be conceptualised as a Gramscian social movement that seeks revolutionary change from the bottom up through contesting the hegemony of the ruling coalition in civil society, or the public sphere. The agents of this hegemonic challenge are the "organic intellectuals" in Gramsci's model, or the *du'āt* (propagandists, Islamic activists) in the model of the Muslim Brotherhood. They serve the two-fold function of (a) working within their own group towards raising the consciousness of the basis and serving them as educators and political leaders and (b) working within the public sphere towards spreading the counter-hegemonic message both in words and practice.

However, I argue that the role of organic intellectuals within political movements is more problematic than it is made to appear in many Gramscian and Neo-Gramscian approaches. The case of the Muslim Brotherhood points towards two sources of ambivalence and tension. The first is the "question of the party": Gramsci considered the Communist party as a given and as a necessity, but he was aware of its authoritarian potential; most neo-Gramscian approaches, however, do not give much attention to organisation structures at all. In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, the question of the party-organisation has become a major source of debate and conflict.

The second issue pertains to the concept of organicity itself, whose meaning is more or less taken for granted by Gramsci: But what makes an intellectual "organic"? It is social origin and rootedness in a certain group (and how is this group defined?), is it membership in a movement or party, or is it a broad commitment to a certain cause? Looking at the case of the *du'āt*, we can detect a growing sense of confusion over what it means to be an activist in the service of Islam. Does loyalty to the Muslim Brotherhood leadership always override loyalty to the "Muslim people"? In whose name and interest should the *du'āt* act in public during times of political change?

My analysis, based on case studies and primary sources, will lead to the conclusion that disagreement about these crucial questions has been a root cause for many splits and defections, and hence a crucial factor in the current crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Arab uprisings were not a root cause, but an important trigger, because they posed these questions with added urgency and exacerbated already existing tensions within the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, seen in the light of Gramscian theory, is not only interesting in itself. It can also inspire investigation into certain blind spots of Gramscian and Neo-Gramscian approaches concerning the dynamics between organic intellectuals and parties/organisations, as well as the concept of organicity as such.