



ANNE ALEXANDER &
MOSTAFA BASSIOUNY

**BREAD,
FREEDOM,
SOCIAL
JUSTICE**

WORKERS & THE
EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION



Bread, freedom, social justice

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Workers and the Egyptian Revolution

ANNE ALEXANDER AND MOSTAFA BASSIOUNY



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Finally, we cannot introduce this book without emphasizing that writing it has been as much a political project as an intellectual one. For us, the book's real value cannot be measured solely by assessing its impact on debates about the causes and nature of the Arab Revolutions among academics or journalists, but rather whether it plays a small role in the process of winning some of those who have experienced and been inspired by the Arab Revolutions to revolutionary socialist ideas. We are not neutral observers and commentators, but first and foremost political activists, whose main goal is to make whatever modest contribution we can to the victory of the struggle for bread, freedom and social justice. Despite all the difficulties and darkness of the road ahead, we remain convinced that the most important lesson of the 25 January Revolution is the glimpse it gave us of the potential of ordinary people, when the power of the organised working class drives their struggles forward, to create a world free of exploitation and oppression.

Anne Alexander
Mostafa Bassiouny
July 2014

Acronyms and abbreviations

When rendering Arabic proper names, we have adopted the spelling most commonly used in English, where possible respecting the spelling favoured by the individuals themselves (thus Mohamed ElBaradei, rather than Muhammad al-Barada'i). Other Arabic words have been transliterated using a simplified version of the system adopted by the Library of Congress which is widely used in academic literature. We have retained the inverted apostrophe to represent both the Arabic letters *ayn* and *hamza* in the middle of words, but not at the beginning or end of words, and we have avoided the use of other diacritical marks or special characters. We have rendered the Arabic letter *jim* with the English letter *g*, following common Egyptian pronunciation.

In order not to burden the non-Arabic speaking reader, we have translated, rather than transliterated, names of organisations in the main text, however a list of these is presented here, along with their English acronyms, and other abbreviations and acronyms used frequently in the text. In the case of the property tax collectors' union, RETAU, we have chosen to use the acronym based on the American English translation of the union's name, as this is the form adopted by the union itself in its English-language correspondence.

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations
BIWU	Banking and Insurance Workers Union (<i>al-niqaba al-amma lil-ammilin bil-bunuk wal-ta'miniyyat</i>)
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (<i>al-gihaz al-markazy lil-ta'bia al-ama wal-ihsa</i>)
CTUWS	Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (<i>dar al-khidamat al-niqabiyya wal-ummaliyya</i>)
CSS	Centre for Socialist Studies (<i>markaz al-dirasat al-ishtarakiyya</i>)
DWR	Doctors Without Rights (<i>al-ataba bila huquq</i>)
EDLC	Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (<i>mu'atamr ummal masr al-dimuqrati</i>)
EFITU	Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (<i>al-ittihad al-masry lil-niqabat al-mustaqilla</i>)
ECESR	Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (<i>al-markaz al-masry lil-huquq al-iqtisadiyya wal-igtima'iyya</i>)
ETUWW	Egyptian Trade Union and Workers' Watch (<i>al-marsad al-niqaby wal-ummaly al-masry</i>)
EISC	Egyptian Iron and Steel Company (<i>al-hadid wal-sulb al-masriyya</i>)
ERSAP	Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme
ESCO	Egyptian Industries for Silk and Cotton (<i>sharika al-mahallat al-sana'iyya lil-harir wal-qutun</i>)
ETUF	Egyptian Trade Union Federation (<i>al-ittihad al-amliniqabat ummal masr</i>)
FUC	Factory Union Committee (<i>al-lagna al-niqabiyya</i>)
FJP	Freedom and Justice Party (<i>hizb al-hurriya wal-adala</i>)
GUTW	General Union of Textile Workers (<i>al-niqaba al-amma lil-ammilin bil-ghazl wal-nasig</i>)
HTU	Health Technicians Union (<i>al-niqaba al-mustaqilla lil-fanniyyin al-sahiyyin</i>)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
LE	Egyptian pounds
NCW	National Council for Wages (<i>al-maglis al-qawmi</i>)

	<i>lil-ugur</i>)
NDP	National Democratic Party (<i>al-hizb al-watany al-dimuqraty</i>)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PPP	public-private partnership
PR	proportional representation
PSI	Public Services International
PTA	Property Tax Agency (<i>maslahat al-al-dara'ib al-aqariyya</i>)
PT	Public Transport Authority (<i>ha'it al-naql al-am</i>)
RETAU	Real Estate Tax Authority Union (<i>al-niqaba al-amma lil-ammilin bil-al-dara'ib al-aqariyya</i>)
RS	Revolutionary Socialists (<i>al-ishtarakiyun al-thawriyun</i>)
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (<i>al-maglis al-ala lil-quwwat al-musalaha</i>)
Al-Tagammu	National Progressive Unionist Assembly (<i>hizb al-tagammu al-watany al-taqadamy al-wahdawy</i>)
TE	Telecom Egypt (<i>al-misriyya lil-itisalat</i>)
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (<i>al-ittihad al-am al-tunsi lil-shughal</i>)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCNL	Workers' Committee for National Liberation (<i>lagna al-ummal lil tahrir al-qawmi</i>)

INTRODUCTION

From the Republic of Tahrir to the Republic of Fear? Theorising revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt 2011–14

Welcome to Tahrir Square ... the republic of possible dreams. In this liberated corner of Egypt, protesters are experimenting with self-rule, and inventing forms of resilience. Veteran communists, critics and writers, members of Al-Azhar and priests ... all the sections of this revolution which the youth are leading. As for the presenters on the regime's TV stations, they have no idea how to deal with the truth which is becoming increasingly hard to deny.¹

Exactly three years after the greatest popular uprising in the Middle East for a generation, the hopes inspired by Tahrir's 'republic of possible dreams' seemed a distant memory. The square filled again with crowds on 25 January 2014, but this time they were carrying pictures of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's new military leader and cheering on his ruthless war against opponents of the regime. Around a hundred were killed on the streets that day, shot down for daring to mark the anniversary of the revolution in defiant protest. With tens of thousands filling the prisons and uncounted numbers disappearing into the dark places of what veteran Islamist leader Abdul-Moneim al-Fotouh called the 'Republic of Fear',² many within Egypt and far beyond are

questioning whether January 2011's demands of bread, freedom and social justice can ever be realised.

Yet, despite the confidence of Mubarak's generals and secret policemen that they can crush all resistance or co-opt dissenters, the social and political contradictions which detonated the revolution in the first place have not been resolved. As we outline in this book, the specific character of the Egyptian Revolution poses enormous problems for those hoping to re-stabilise the authoritarian regime. This book uncovers in particular how the workers' movement has shaped the Egyptian Revolution, and presents evidence for our contention that the organised working class has a special role to play in the struggle to realise the political and social goals of the January 2011 uprising.

In this chapter we set out the theoretical framework for the rest of the book. We focus first on the interdependence between states and capitals at national, regional and international levels and then address the relationship between political and social revolutions. We also present our approach to understanding the Islamist movement and outline our analysis of the role of the trade union bureaucracy. Finally we explore how the concept of 'permanent revolution', developed by Marx and Trotsky in response to the defeats of the 1848 and 1905 Revolutions in Europe and Russia, can be applied in an Egyptian context.

States and capitals in the Middle East: some observations

The global capitalist economy developed in a highly uneven fashion, as states which adopted capitalism early were able to win and defend opportunities for 'their' capitalists at the expense of their competitors. Yet, as Marx and Engels argued in the 1840s, capitalism cannot be contained within the borders of any national economy, as the capitalist class ranges the globe tirelessly in search of new

sources of raw materials, new labour markets and new customers for its products.³ Our analysis of development of the capitalist state and capitalist class in Egypt therefore lies within a broader historical perspective on the uneven development of the relationship between states and capitals on regional and international levels. The history of capitalism in Egypt likewise cannot be separated from the history of imperialism in the Middle East, which we understand as a specific stage in the development of global capitalism characterised by the fusion of processes of military and economic competition between the most powerful capitalist states, and not simply as another term for military conquest.⁴ Rivalry between the various imperialist powers that have sought to dominate the Middle East in order to secure privileged access to its natural resources and strategic locations has shaped the way in which these powers have exercised domination over the people living there.

In contrast to a perspective that sees the state as separate from and counterposed to ‘civil society’, we see the state as a brutal instrument of class power – a weapon in the hands of the ruling class. However, the state is at the same time a set of institutions which *appears* to mediate in *all* the conflicts of capitalist society. State institutions apply laws to employers and employees, arbitrate in disputes between neighbours, enforce taxation on rich and poor, and often regulate working conditions and wages. The state’s ‘mediating’ role in conflicts between workers and their bosses is, however, a carefully crafted illusion: where the state appears to take the workers’ side, this is based on a calculation that the *general* interest of the capitalist class is best served by concessions even if this is detrimental to the interest of the particular capitalist party to the dispute. The real mediator in this situation is the trade-union bureaucracy, if one exists – a point to which we will return later. The state’s role as mediator between the competing interests of different *capitals* is, however, perfectly genuine. It is the paternal authority conjured up from

the imaginations and needs of a ‘band of warring brothers’, as Marx termed the bourgeoisie. As Colin Barker argues, the state is a ‘field of intracapitalist conflict’ which takes on its specific form as ‘an impersonal mechanism of public authority isolated from society’ precisely in order to be able to arbitrate effectively between different capitals.⁵

The idea of the state as an ‘impersonal mechanism’ is, however, also a critical component of the ideological apparatus that helps to sustain those already in power. As we explore in more detail in Chapter 9, one of the most potent weapons in the ideological armoury of counter-revolution has been to invoke a vision of the state as an autonomous, neutral machine, which must be preserved at any cost, unless society is to risk complete breakdown and disintegration. Defending the inviolacy of the state (*al-dawla*) was in this context a key mechanism for the rehabilitation of key elements of the pre-revolutionary regime (*al-nidham*). Grasping the impossibility of separating ‘the state’ from the social antagonisms that make necessary its existence is important if we are to go beyond understanding the state as a set of institutions, or even simply a charmed circle of personalities. Such a narrow conception of the state is a major weakness in Kandil’s exploration of the Egyptian Revolution through the lens of rivalry between the Egyptian state’s military, security and civilian leaderships.⁶

As Barker remarks, one of the problems with Marxist debates about the state is that they often seem to assume that ‘capitalism has but one state’, whereas unfortunately ‘the beast is numerous’.⁷ It is important to emphasize that the beast is also *varied*. Capitalism in Russia, for example, emerged in a highly uneven, concentrated form, thanks largely to the efforts of the pre-capitalist state, which ‘hothoused’ the development of both a bourgeoisie and a working class in sectors directly connected to its military and economic competition with the European powers, such as shipbuilding and communications infrastructure.⁸ In the case of

the capitalist states that developed in countries that were colonised by the same European powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, analogous processes can be observed. Here the colonial authorities steered the processes of state formation in directions that suited the perpetuation of their own rule. Often at the same time they actively or passively impeded the development of indigenous capitalism, which might disrupt an imperial division of labour relegating the populations of the colonies to the subordinate position of producers of raw materials and consumers of finished goods. Anti-colonial rebellion after 1945 in large parts of the 'colonial world' involved a would-be local ruling class seizing the state and using it to begin a process of 'hothouse' economic development (in some cases in political alliance with and in direct emulation of the rulers of the Soviet state).

In Egypt, the seizure of power by junior army officers in 1952 under the leadership of Gamal Abdel-Nasser represented just such an attempt to overcome the blockage imposed by the political alliance between the colonial power (Britain) and large landowners, led by the royal family. One of the Free Officers' first acts in power was to reform land ownership with the aim of mobilising agricultural surpluses in order to fund industrial take-off. This was followed by the transformation of large parts of private capital into state capital and the massive expansion of the state's activities in production through a programme of import-substitution industrialisation under the guidance of Soviet economic planners.⁹ We discuss in Chapters 1 and 2 what happened when this strategy of accumulation reached an impasse locally with the entwined military and economic crises of the late 1960s, and internationally with the global shift in strategies of accumulation with the end of the post-war boom.

The roots of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 lie in the transformation of the relationships between the state, capital and labour that took place over the previous thirty-five years on both a local

and a global scale. In Egypt, this transformation was initiated at the highest level of the state by Anwar al-Sadat with his adoption of the project of *infitah* (economic and political opening) following the death of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1970. *Infitah* represented a strategic realignment for the Egyptian ruling class on two levels simultaneously. On a geopolitical level Sadat shifted from dependence on the Soviet Union towards a new relationship of dependency on the United States. From the beginning, however, it was understood that implementation of liberal economic reforms following the model that was appearing on a global scale during the 1970s would be a critical component of this realignment. The emergence of what would later be called ‘neoliberalism’ signalled the beginning of a global shift away from economic policies centred on developing the state as a provider of public services and direct producer through the expansion of welfare systems and nationalised industries. The turn towards neoliberal policies on a global scale has often been equated simplistically with the notion that the state is shrinking, a view fostered by the supporters of neoliberalism themselves. Yet, as Naguib notes,

The policies of neoliberalism were never about dismantling or even reducing the role of the state in the economy but rather about increasing the role of the state as facilitator of capitalist profit-making at the expense of the working class. This created an even more intimate relation between state and capital.¹⁰

The ‘retreat of the state’ was a much more specific and limited process, confined to the abandonment of an ideology which projected the state’s key role as a guarantor of a minimum standard of social equity through its direct intervention in the process of production, distribution and redistribution of wealth. By contrast, neoliberalism protected the state’s role in facilitating the process of capital accumulation. Nor did the state completely withdraw from the provision of welfare or public infrastructure, but rather

neoliberal policies meant the partial cannibalisation of these economic sectors in order to transfer some of their costs directly to the poor, *and* to facilitate their transformation into machines for making profit. Some of the mechanisms which had been used during the previous generation for a limited redistribution of surplus wealth *downwards* were reconfigured as means to redistribute wealth *upwards*. State-run industries would undergo a similar process. Some elements would be directly sold to private capital; in other cases the state partially divested to share profits with private investors, while others faced neglect, decay and eventual closure.

This history gives a partial glimpse of how the multifaceted relationships between states and capitals have developed. States provide a host of ‘services’ for the capitalist class as a whole, including enforcing discipline on their workforces, organising the reproduction of labour power through a variation on the welfare state, and making workers contribution to the cost of their own maintenance through taxation. The state may also secure and distribute external sources of income, such as various forms of rent and aid, in addition to the function discussed above of mediating between different capitals in their collective, ‘national’ interest. Chris Harman argues powerfully that states and capitals should be seen as ‘structurally interdependent’:

The groups of capitals and the state with which they are associated form a system in which each affects the others. The specific character of each capital is influenced by its interaction with the other capitals and the state. It reflects not only the general drive to expand value, to accumulate, but also the specific environment in which it has grown up. The state and the individual capitals are intertwined, with each feeding off the other. ... Neither the state nor the particular capitals can easily escape this structural interdependence.¹¹

Capitals and states bound together within such systems are the product of specific histories and geographies, which constrain

capitals' ability to uproot themselves at will should the conditions for accumulation become less favourable. Likewise, Harman argues, the structural interdependence of states and capitals sets limits on the autonomy of the state bureaucracy. These insights provide an important starting point for addressing the question of state autonomy in the context of the Middle East, an issue which has traditionally been focused on the debates over the theory of the 'rentier state'.¹² Such accounts have emphasised the distorting effect of access to 'rent' for the exploitation of major deposits of oil on the development of state bureaucracies. Such state bureaucracies have been able to free themselves from the need to raise revenue through taxation, proponents of this theory have argued, and thus can act with a degree of autonomy and capriciousness, which is an important factor in sustaining authoritarianism in the region. Analysis of the Gulf has frequently assumed that in such 'rentier states' the dynamic, productive role is entirely taken up by foreign capital. By contrast, as Hanieh's work clearly demonstrates, massive conglomerates spanning all three circuits of capital accumulation in the Gulf (productive, commodity and financial), have emerged in recent decades, which knit together Gulf private and state capitals across the region.¹³ Foreign capitals and states still play a critical role in this system, which is predicated on the Gulf's particular place within the global economy as a key source of the most important commodity in twentieth-century capitalist development: oil. However, they now relate primarily to a rising capitalist class, which has emerged as a central player in the political economy of the wider Middle East, not to a collection of pre-capitalist tribal elites. As the capitalist class in the Gulf has matured, so too has its thirst for investment in production. Again, as Hanieh demonstrates, Gulf capital investment in Egypt is found across a wide range of sectors, with major investments in food production for both domestic and regional markets, textiles and transport as well as

finance and banking and real estate.¹⁴ These investments create a very direct material interest in restoring suitable conditions for capital accumulation on a regional scale for Gulf capital by financing counter-revolution in Egypt.

The tendency to refer to states and capitals in the singular is, as noted above, a convenient simplification but often misleading. Similar problems also arise when we scratch the surface of the labels ‘state capital’ and ‘private capital’. Rivalry and competition between different capitals is, as discussed above, a central reason for the existence of the state in the first place. However, it is also important to recognise that where the state acts as a capitalist, this will give rise to a *system* of interdependent state capitals, in the plural, not a monolithic bloc of ‘state capital’ in the singular. In the case of Egypt, one particular form of state capital – military capital – has benefited from the shift towards neoliberal policies, while the fortunes of other state capitals, in particular civilian public-sector manufacturing, have declined. In fact, it may be justifiable to claim that the rise of military capital as a distinct form of state capital in Egypt is a product of the period of neoliberal reforms. For, although military appointments permeated every level of the state bureaucracy under Nasser, and army officers played a key role in *managing* the drive to build up public-sector manufacturing in particular, the military’s creation of its own manufacturing empire dates from the 1980s, at the very moment when state policies were moving towards disengagement from the public sector in preparation for eventual privatisation.

Political and social revolutions: preliminary notes

There is no space here to do justice to the debates over the nature of political and social revolutions, nor to reference properly the voluminous literature generated by these discussions.¹⁵ We will focus therefore on the application of a particular understanding

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