

Lessons from the Egyptian Revolution

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Those who make a revolution
halfway, dig their own graves! -
St.Just

The Egyptian Revolution of January 25 to February 11 2011 has been the greatest revolutionary struggle of the 21st century to date.



This is true first in terms of the level of mass mobilisation involved. For Trotsky, ‘the direct interference of the masses in historic events’ was ‘the most indubitable feature of a revolution’¹ and as Mostafa Ali wrote at the time, ‘The sheer numbers of those who participated in the uprising as well as their percentage compared to the total population is unprecedented and astonishing.’

It is estimated that between January 25, when the demonstrations started, and February 11, when the dictator Hosni Mubarak was toppled, at least 15 million people out of a population of 80 million—that is more than 20 percent of the population—took part in the mass mobilizations.

A friend of mine in Cairo reminded me - and he was probably bragging a little bit - that

15 million protesters exceeds the total number of people who participated in all the protests that took place in all the countries of Eastern Europe at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

It is true that young people led the charge on January 25, and that most of the 400 martyrs who were killed during the uprising were under the age of 30. But young people were not alone in the streets. From day one, the Egyptian uprising was a popular revolution. From day one, millions of workers, poor peasants, poor housewives and all sectors of society took part in the mobilizations across the country.²

Second, it was immense in terms of its immediate and concrete achievement. In just eighteen days of mass revolutionary struggle it secured the downfall of a hugely powerful dictator, previously seen as the unassailable strongman of the region.. As I wrote at the time, the fall of Mubarak

was nothing short of miraculous. Hosni Mubarak had ruled Egypt for thirty years, during which time he had been the world’s second biggest receiver of US aid (after Israel, of course) and had built the most formidable apparatus of power and repression. No one seems to be quite sure of the size of the Egyptian State Security, but, as everyone who has visited the town knows, Cairo on an ordinary day seemed to have cops on every street corner. Cairo, when anything untoward was afoot - an oppositional conference or a protest of

¹Leon Trotsky, Preface to *The History of the Russian Revolution*.

²Mostafa Ali, ‘The Spring of the Egyptian Revolution’ <http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/30/spring-of-the-revolution>

some kind - resembled a city under military occupation. Moreover what every Caireen and, probably, every Egyptian knew was that these cops, these numberless State Security men, were *systematic* abusers and torturers.[See Aida Seif El Dawla 'Torture: a state policy' in Rabab El-Mahdi & Philip Marfleet, *Egypt: The Moment of Change, London 2009*] And yet this formidable apparatus of power and oppression was smashed, beaten in open combat by an unarmed people fighting, more or less with their bare hands.³

Third, it was outstanding in terms of its inspirational effect internationally. Of course, the Egyptian Revolution was itself inspired by the Tunisian Revolution which secured the overthrow of Zinedine Ben Ali, just 11 days earlier, but it was events in Egypt that really set light to the Arab Spring. Egypt lacks oil but in other respects is the most important Arab country. With the largest population, the biggest cities (Cairo and Alexandria) and largest working class Egypt was, and remains, the key to change in the whole Middle East region, including change in Palestine. As Tony Cliff pointed out long ago 'The road to Jerusalem runs through Cairo'.

Yet the fact is, and this needs to squarely faced, the Egyptian Revolution has been defeated. - from Alexandria to Aswan the old regime is back in power. On 25 January 2011 hundreds of thousands came on to the streets and defeated the police. On 24 January 2015, the eve of the anniversary, Socialist Popular Alliance Party activist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh was taking part in a tiny demonstration of about 25 people to commemorate the martyrs of 2011 when she was shot and killed. The next day - the actual anniversary - saw about 20 people killed, most of them in Matariya, one of the few places there is still regular resistance. The contrast

could hardly be more stark.

And precisely this stark and bitter contrast obliges Marxists to reflect on the experience, draw up a balance sheet, and see what lessons can be learnt.

What not to learn

After every serious defeat there are always those who fall into despair. The rise of the revolution radicalizes people like wildfire because it raises their confidence in their own power and widens their horizons. The victory of counter revolution, inevitably, has the reverse effect driving people back into the isolation and alienation of their individual private lives. To many, especially those newly radicalized, it seems that their revolutionary hopes were just a passing illusion. They fall back into the received wisdom of what Gramsci called 'common sense', i.e. that mixture of nostrums, prejudices, partial truths, superstitions and impressions handed down to them through a multiplicity of channels from the ruling class, the most important and most deadly of which is 'that nothing will ever change' or, more precisely 'You, the masses, can't change anything'.

Even the relatively small minority who engage in theoretical debate are prone to this and in periods of reaction or counter-revolution all sorts of erstwhile revolutionaries search for 'new' ideas to justify their own collapse. 'The bourgeoisie has changed/ the working class has changed - they are now too strong/ we are now too weak.' 'There is something wrong with the national character of the Russians/ the Germans/ the British/ the Arabs/ the Irish or whoever'. 'Revolutions always fail'.⁴

In the face of the inevitability of such responses both in Egypt and internationally it is necessary, first, to insist on some historical perspective.

The fact that, 167 years after Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto, capitalism rules the world means that the history of the revolutionary socialist move-

³John Molyneux, 'Reflections on the Egyptian Revolution', <http://johnmolyneux.blogspot.ie/2011/05/reflections-on-egyptian-revolution.html>

⁴For a response to this particular argument see John Molyneux, 'Do revolutions always fail?' <http://socialistreview.org.uk/390/do-revolutions-always-fail>

ment is first and foremost a history of defeats - of defeats punctuated by victories as Tony Cliff used to say of the class struggle in the eighties. But there are defeats and defeats. The defeat of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, to which the Arab Spring was sometimes compared, formed the foundation for a period of major capitalist expansion which ruled out revolution in the near future as Marx was obliged (by 1850) to recognize.

Given this general prosperity, wherein the productive forces of bourgeois society are developing as luxuriantly as it is possible for them to do within bourgeois relationships, a real revolution is out of the question. Such a revolution is possible only in periods when *both* of these *factors* - the *modern forces* of production and the *bourgeois forms of production* - come *into opposition* with each other... *A new revolution is only a consequence of a new crisis. The one, however, is as sure to come as the other.*⁵

Consequently the International Communist League, for which Marx had written the *Manifesto*, was dissolved and he withdrew from virtually all direct political activity to concentrate on his economic researches until the revival of the movement and the foundation of the First International in 1864. But this is not the current situation. Neither global nor Egyptian capitalism is poised for a new golden age and, although it has recovered some what from the depths of 2008-10, the system is staggering along with generally low and faltering growth rates and with the underlying cause of the crisis, the falling rate of profit, unresolved.

Nor is the defeat of the Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring comparable in scale or depth to the succession of defeats suffered by the international working class in the 1920s and 30s. One has only to list

the principle catastrophes of those years to see this: the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution, the failure of the German Revolution, the defeat of the Italian Red Years and the triumph of Mussolini, the crushing of the Chinese Revolution (1925-27), the betrayal of the British General Strike and crucially, as a consequence of these, the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the victory of the Stalinist counterrevolution which in turn fed into victory of Hitler in 1933 and Franco in Spain.

The cumulative effect of these defeats was to wipe out (literally) many of the advanced layers of the international workers' movement and to drive authentic Marxism represented above all by Trotsky, to the absolute margins of the working class and society, thus postponing for decades the possibility of building genuine mass revolutionary parties. The defeat in Egypt, grievous as it is, does not have this definitive character, either nationally or internationally.

A more accurate parallel in my view is with the victory of the counter revolution over the Russian Revolution of 1905 through the Stolypin Coup of June 1907. Obviously the comparison is not, and cannot be, exact but it does at least give us an appropriate sense of historical scale.

The Stolypin Coup restored the Tsarist autocracy to full power after the concessions that had been wrung from it in 1905 and inaugurated a period of dreadful reaction. The number of workers taking strike action fell from 2.8 million in 1905, to 740,000 in 1907, 176,000 in 1908 and just 47,000 in 1910. There was ferocious repression.

During the dictatorship of Stolypin over 5,000 death sentences were passed and over 3,500 persons were actually executed - this was at least three times as many as during the whole period of the mass movement (not including of course shootings without trial, after the

⁵K.Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-50* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch04.htm>

⁶Strikes statistics cited in Tony Cliff, *Lenin, Vol 1 Building the Party*, London 1975, p.238 and quote from M.N Pokrovsky cited in Cliff, as above p.238. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap13.htm#s3>

suppression of the armed insurrection).⁶

The Bolshevik Party was also severely damaged, membership in Moscow falling from over 5000 in 1906 to 150 by late 1908.

Nevertheless, despite immense difficulties the revolutionary continuity was not broken and the party survived. In 1910 the movement began to revive with student demonstrations followed by the beginning of a strike wave in 1911 and then, in response to the massacre of gold miners in Lena, revolutionary mass strikes in 1912 - the beginning of a movement that culminated in the Revolution of 1917.

Returning from the past to the current situation it is clear that the repression has been horrendous. On the 14 August 2013, the bloodiest single day, when Sisi's armed forces attacked two Muslim Brotherhood protest camps in Cairo, at the very least i.e. on the government's own reckoning 638 people were killed and 3,994 were injured but the figures given by the Muslim Brotherhood are, and with good reason, much higher with the claim that about 2,600 were killed at the Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque sit-in alone. When it comes to arrests estimates range from about 16,000 to about 40,000 being held in prison. This has been accompanied by the grisly spectacle of mass death sentences being handed down by the courts such as the 683 sentenced to death in April 2014. So far these have not been carried out but the fear this generates is obvious.

However, for all its horror, the level of repression has not been such as to completely crush all resistance or to destroy and wipe out all the left. The main victims have been the Muslim Brotherhood but they have been able to mount regular protests, albeit at great cost, in their stronghold of Matariya in North Eastern Cairo. Other small scale demonstrations and protests continue to take place, including on some campuses and, most importantly the regime has not actually taken on and smashed the core of the working class. There continue to be significant strikes such as the 1,000

plus workers who went on strike at the Ain Sokhna port on 25 March demanding late share profits and allowances.⁷

Viewed dispassionately, this is counterrevolutionary violence of a significantly lesser order than not only the great counterrevolutions of the 20th century - Hitler, Stalin, Franco - but also Indonesia in 1965 (500,000 massacred) or Chile in 1973 (probably 30,000 killed) or Argentina's 'dirty war' in 1974-83 (10-30,000 killed and disappeared). In other words, like 1907, it is atrocious but recoverable from in the not too distant future.

Also important is the international situation. As we have already noted (and I shall return to this point) the Egyptian Revolution was part of an international wave of struggle and that wave, known as the Arab Spring, was contained and defeated not only in Egypt but also in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria, producing other dreadful consequences such as ISIS. But this is not the whole of the Arab world. In Tunisia the democratic gains of the revolution remain partially intact (despite many of 'the left' collaborating with and helping to rehabilitate the old ruling party⁸) and 2014 saw a political victory for Palestine over the Israeli aggression with Operation Positive Edge - solidarity with Palestine and the BDS campaign continues to grow despite the tsunami of Islamophobia.

Moreover, the Middle East is not the world. Marx pointed out in 1848 that 'In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed' and the immense globalised development of capitalism in recent decades has produced an immense international development of the working class. In today's world every significant country possesses a proletariat which is a far larger proportion of the population than was the case in Russia in 1917 and in many cases is a majority. Particularly striking is the degree of urbanization (not identical to proletarianisation, but clearly related to it): urbanization in Argentina is over 92 percent, Brazil 90.6

⁷As reported in the *Egypt Independent*, 5 April 2015, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/>

⁸Thanks to Anne Alexander for this point.

percent, Chile 89 percent, USA 84.5 percent, Cuba, 75.5 percent, Iran 69 percent, Turkey 71 percent, South Africa 62 percent, and China 53.7 percent with the world figure standing at 52 percent.

This constitutes an immense reserve of potential power distributed across all five continents. It means that it is eminently possible to bounce back from terrible defeats in one country or zone (eg the Middle East) in another zone eg East Asia. Moreover it is clear that the defeat in Egypt, and of the Arab Spring overall, did not halt or throw back the struggle in Southern Europe which it had helped to inspire. This article began by contrasting Cairo on the 25 January 2011 with Cairo on the 25 January 2015 but the 25 January 2015 was also the date of Syriza's victory in Greece. It is also more than possible that just as the overthrow of Mubarak fed into the struggle in Spain and elsewhere so struggles and victories elsewhere can feed back into Egypt and the Middle East.

Of special importance in this context is China which has by far the largest proletariat in the world, numbering maybe 500 million or more. This immense social force the like of which has never before existed in world history is far from quiescent; it engages in strikes, demonstrations and riots on regular basis but so far they remain largely localized and the Chinese ruling class does its utmost, through a combination of concessions and repression, to keep them that way. But the moment the Chinese proletariat generalizes and starts to move on a nationwide scale it will be truly awesome in its power and will rock the world. Nor is the Chinese working class the only one capable of playing this role, merely the biggest.

This huge growth in urban wage labour and thus in the objective social power of the global working class is, in itself, reason not to abandon the revolutionary project but the moment we look to the future, and I mean not the next year or two but the next decade or two it becomes clear that the objective conditions for international workers revolution will dramatically mature.

The combination of ongoing economic crises and turbulence shaped fundamentally by the underlying decline in the rate of

profit and the rapidly worsening environmental crisis, of which climate change is the extreme but by no means the only expression, will lead humanity into a succession of social and political disasters and cataclysms resolvable only by socialist revolution or fascist barbarism. Even if capitalism were able to solve its economic crisis it will do so by means, namely restored economic growth, which will exacerbate climate change. Meanwhile the decline in the rate of profit inhibits capitalism, even if it were so inclined, from doing anything serious to halt runaway climate change.

To return to Egypt it does not require any special powers of foresight, rather it is necessary only to pose the question, to grasp the terrible impact of future climate change on a country which is mostly desert and utterly dependent on one great river which rises 3000 miles south of its southern border.

This combination of the tremendous forces for revolution and terrible price to be paid for failing to achieve it compel us to address the lessons of the Egyptian Revolution in a spirit of revolutionary optimism, clear that those lessons need to be learned so as to help win next time - for there will be another day.

The Main Lesson

The main overall lesson of the Egyptian Revolution is encapsulated in the quotation from St. Just at the head of this article: 'Those who make a revolution half way dig their own graves'. The fact that this is a quote from St. Just signifies that this is hardly a new lesson. Tony Cliff observed

All revolutions start as half revolutions. The new co-exists with the old. Thus the February 1917 revolution got rid of the Tsar, got rid of the police, established the soviets, workers' committees in the factories - all this was new. But the old survived: the generals remained in the army, the capitalists continued to own the factories, the landlords the land,

and the imperialist war continued...

Since 1917 there have been many revolutions that went only half way and therefore ended with a counter-revolution.⁹

There are fundamental reasons why this should be so and they applied in full measure to Egypt. From the point of view of the bourgeoisie, capitalism cannot tolerate a risen people for any great length of time. The 'normal', i.e. successful, functioning of the system is incompatible with large numbers continually on the streets (they interfere with business!), regular mass strikes, workplace occupations, demands for participatory democracy etc. These things can, and will, be accepted for a time but only to gain time, so as to later to 'restore order' by returning the masses to passivity. Moreover, the ruling class will want, if it can, to take revenge on the revolution and punish the masses for ever having had the temerity to rebel and threaten 'society as we know it'.

From the point of the revolutionary movement, mass revolutionary consciousness develops only in the course of revolutionary struggle. It is an illusion to believe that the majority, as opposed to a significant minority (the so-called 'vanguard') can first be won to revolutionary ideas, through propaganda and education, and then the revolution can be launched.. The dominance of bourgeois ideology, capitalist control of the media and education, and of innumerable institutions of civil society that monitor and manage people's daily lives makes this impossible. But this means that if the level of struggle is not maintained, if the masses become either exhausted or complacent, their level of consciousness will also decline and start to fall back towards its 'normal' state.

This is why the momentum of revolutionary struggle has to be maintained and why revolutions that do not go forward are thrown back.

⁹Tony Cliff, *Marxism at the Millenium*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/2000/millennium/chap03.htm>

¹⁰The Brotherhood were by far the largest and best known opposition force during the Mubarak regime. In the same way when the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917 initial mass support went to the Cadets, SRs and moderate socialists and when the Kaiser was overthrown by the German Revolution of 1919 it was the Social Democrats who came to the fore.

The Muslim Brotherhood, who were the main initial political beneficiaries of the Revolution¹⁰, did not have a clue about this. Like the most naïve and historically uninformed reformists they believed they could simply win the elections, take control of Egypt and run the country as a 'normal' bourgeois democracy on the basis of neo-liberal economics and in cooperation with the military and the rest of the state apparatus inherited from the Mubarak years, accompanied by a veneer of Islamism.

Immediately after the fall of Mubarak when SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) took over and revolutionary enthusiasm was at its height the Brotherhood opposed popular mobilization on the streets and worked with the army to pacify the situation. It set its face against any attempt to cleanse the state apparatus of its many mini-Mubaraks.

After their victory in the election the Morsi government continued this collaboration, while extending it to the international sphere: they pledged to 'honour all Egypt's international obligations', which meant maintaining the treaties supporting Israel. They also hoped to keep 'the international community' sweet with orthodox neo-liberal economic policies which inevitably alienated their support among the working class and the poor. At the same time non-cooperation and sabotage by elements in the state apparatus and government departments made the Morsi government appear completely incompetent as basic services ceased working. Their only significant responses to were a Presidential decree in November 2012 (rescinded in the face of protests) and a Constitutional Referendum in December (narrowly passed on a very low turnout): moves that were probably designed to strengthen the hand of Morsi and his government vis-a-vis the military but were widely interpreted as a Muslim Brotherhood Islamist power grab, thus further antagonizing wide strata of the people.

In this way the Muslim Brotherhood systematically prepared their own downfall.

To say the revolution must not stop half way means that revolutionaries must adopt as their strategic goal and orientation the establishment of workers' power and the overthrow of capitalism as a first step towards international socialist revolution. In other words it is to adopt the perspective of permanent revolution first articulated by Marx in 1850, then elaborated by Trotsky in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1905 and later, to what became called the Third World in 1928. Only from a political standpoint that refuses to accept the limits of capitalist economic and social relations and rejects the logic of competitive capital accumulation is it possible to maintain the necessary momentum of the revolution.

In this context it is worth saying that the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its ideological peculiarities (i.e. its Islamism and consequently its lack of any socialist rhetoric or aspiration) was not **fundamentally** different from the role played by many other political parties and formations adhering to what is known as a 'stages theory' of social revolution. This is the idea that the strategy of the left should be first to achieve a democratic (or bourgeois democratic or anti-imperialist or national) revolution and the struggle for workers power and socialism should be put on hold till after this first stage has been consolidated. All those who accept this framework - whether they call themselves Marxists, communists, socialists, anarchists, nationalists or Islamists, whether they are Allende's Popular Unity, the ANC in South Africa - are caught in what is essentially the same trap of demobilizing the very movement that brought them to power and imposing the logic and requirements of capitalism on their own social base.

The International Dimension

To invoke the perspective of permanent revolution is also to stress the international nature of the revolution. Marx and Engels grasped the fundamental international char-

acter of the working class movement and the socialist revolution as early as 1845 but the Egyptian Revolution was a spectacular demonstration of the fact that this basic principle is now more relevant and more true than ever before.

In the first place, both the underlying and the immediate causes of the Revolution were international in nature. The crisis of the Mubarak regime which developed over more than a decade was rooted in its neo-liberal economic policies

[These] further integrated the Egyptian economy in an uneven way into the world capitalist economy and internally impoverished the vast majority of the population ... The great recession that shook the globe in 2008 accelerated the crisis in Egypt... Egypt is highly dependent on exports to Europe and these fell rapidly due to the drop in demand that followed contraction... the situation was worsened by the advent of the draconian austerity policies in Europe. Remittances from emigrants fell by 17 percent... tourism revenues also went from a rise of 24 percent in 2008 to a fall of 1.1 percent and the Suez Canal revenues fell by 7.2 percent compared to 2008.

A third factor [was] the sharp rises in the costs of basic foods. Egypt's dependence on imported food, particularly wheat, makes it difficult for the government to shield the economy from the effect of global food prices¹¹

In terms of the development of resistance to the Mubarak regime the second Palestinian Intifada of September 2000 played an important mobilizing role as did the Iraq War of 2003 when 40,000 protested and Tahrir Square was occupied for 24 hours in what Naguib describes as a 'rehearsal for the

¹¹Sameh Naguib, 'The Egyptian Revolution', London 2011, p.3,11-12

¹²As above, p.8.

2011 revolutionary occupation' ¹² Then, of course it was the Tunisian Revolution that provided the final spark.

However it was the speed of the response to the victory in Egypt i.e. the overthrow of Mubarak, that was really astonishing. On the day Mubarak fell, 11 February, I was outside the Egyptian Embassy with members of Egyptian community in Dublin. When the news came through they danced and sang in the street and one guy, evidently a Libyan, got out a picture of Colonel Gaddafi and held it up to the crowd. 'Him next', he said. And sure enough on the 17 February, six days later the Libyan Revolution began. But by then there was also already a revolt in Bahrain on the Pearl Roundabout (starting 15 February). In Yemen protests in the capital, Sana'a, began on 27 January - two days after the beginning in Egypt - and by the 18 February and 11 March there were tens of thousands on the streets of Yemen's main cities.

The Syrian Revolution was 'slower' to start. It did not begin until the 6 March when 12 teenagers in Daraa were arrested for writing on the walls of the city 'The people demand the fall of the regime!' - the great slogan from Tunisia and Egypt. By the 15 May the spirit of the Arab Spring had leapt across the Mediterranean to Spain with the occupation of Puerta del Sol and other cities by the Indignados and by 25 May there were similar mass protests in Syntagma Square in Athens.

The revolutionary wave that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917 was far stronger and deeper than that in 2011 but the pace at which it spread was slower. The German Revolution did not break out till November 1918 - a whole year later. The Italian Red Years and the peak of the wave did not come till 1919-20.

What lies behind this increased pace is, of course, the development of the forces of production which has brought about greatly increased international economic and, consequently, cultural integration so that the same multinational corporations operate in downtown Cairo, in Istanbul, Madrid and London. On one side of Tahrir Square stands the Nile Hilton, on the other there

is McDonalds. It is a fulfillment of Marx's immensely prescient insight in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.

One part of this development is the enormous advance that has occurred in all forms of communication ranging from transport to social media. The role of social media has, of course, been the subject of much hype and the Egyptian Revolution has been depicted as if were a 'twitter' revolution, driven by mobile phones and the internet. This was clearly a massive exaggeration. When Mubarak shut down the internet in Egypt it did not halt the revolution but then neither did the use of social media prevent the triumph of the counter revolution. Nevertheless when it comes to spreading news and ideas internationally contemporary means of communication undoubtedly facilitate the process. When the revolutionary journalist John Reed, author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, traveled from America to Russia in 1917 the journey took him over one month and then another two months to return to America in early 1918. Antonio Gramsci was not able to read the writings of Lenin until 1919 or later. By contrast the great street battles of the Egyptian Revolution were live streamed round the world on Al Jazeera and the revolutionary, Hossam el-Hamalawy, had tens of thousands of Twitter followers world wide.

Another corollary of this intense internationalization of the revolution, confirmed by the Egyptian experience is the bankruptcy of nationalism. Arab nationalism is haunted by the spectre of its greatest representative,

Gamal Abdel Nasser but it is no accident that the half century since Nasser's heyday has seen no comparable figure emerge in the Arab world, only grotesque caricatures such as Saddam Hussein and Bashar Al-Assad, who shared Nasser's ability to repress the left but not his resistance to imperialism. Egypt's leading Nasserist of recent years has been Hamdeen Sabahi, erstwhile leader of the Karama Party and then member of the National Salvation Front. During the Mubarak years Sabahi played an honourable role being arrested 17 times. He opposed the Iraq War and during those years he could be seen at the Cairo Conferences in the company of the likes of John Rees and John Rose. He supported the 2011 Revolution and stood, more or less as the candidate of the left, in the 2012 Presidential Elections where he finished in third place with 21.5 percent of the vote, 700,000 behind the second place candidate, the military's Ahmad Shafiq. Then, in the course of 2012-3 he moved rapidly rightwards becoming a supporter of Al-Sisi and the military in their repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, thus becoming completely complicit in the counter revolution.

Lenin insisted a distinction be made between the nationalism of the oppressors and that of the oppressed. The former was wholly reactionary, the latter was progressive or rather contained a significant progressive element. The distinction was correct at the time and retains much relevance today. To see its importance one has only to compare the different political and ideological character of British and Irish nationalism. British nationalism, as it becomes more militant and emphatic leads from the Tory Party through UKIP to the EDL and BNP. Irish nationalism leads from Fianna Fail via Sinn Fein to republican socialism and James Connolly.¹³

Nationalism, because of its fundamentally bourgeois nature, has always had a propensity to collaborate with imperialism as Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang

demonstrated in 1927, but the expansion and globalization of multinational capitalism has reduced the economic and political space for radical or anti-imperialist nationalism. It has also led to the emergence of a number of centres of independent capital accumulation and sub-imperialisms occupying intermediate positions usually in alliance with US or other major imperialist powers. This makes it very easy for nationalist political forces to turn into conservative or even reactionary formations, especially when they ally themselves with the military. Kemalism in Turkey is a prime example of this, as is Ba'athism in Iraq and Syria and the trajectory of Nasserism in Egypt, as personified by Sabahi, also reflects this.

The bankruptcy and failure of nationalism has also been a major factor in the emergence of Islamism as such a potent political force in the region in recent decades.

Strategy and Tactics

The necessity of the perspective of permanent revolution, ie of the strategic goal of workers' power and international revolution does not mean, however, that applying this perspective in practice is simple matter of marching boldly forwards without regard for tactics, manoeuvres, and even compromises, sometimes of a difficult nature. The experience of the Egyptian Revolution demonstrated this again and again and it is an experience which has to be assimilated and learned from by both Egyptian revolutionaries and by the wider international movement. What follows here are a few examples.

The first is what I would call the danger of *revolutionary intoxication*. Revolutions, festivals of the oppressed, are exceptionally exhilarating experiences. We - the working class, the left, the oppressed, and the revolutionary activists - spend most of our time either being ground down by daily exploitation and drudgery or 'banging our heads against a brick wall' in frustrating,

¹³It should be noted that Ireland today is no longer a neo-colony or subordinate to British rule except in the Six Counties and this seriously modifies the role and nature of Irish nationalism but the fact that the whole nationalist/republican tradition was formed in struggle against British imperialism has significantly shaped its ideological formation.

often unsuccessful, attempts to build resistance. When the masses come onto the streets in their millions and score victories over the forces of reaction and the state this is, of course, extraordinarily exciting. Anyone who watched, never mind actually participated in, events such as the battles of 25 January, the 28 January and the Battle of the Camel, and was not moved to the core by the experience is not a revolutionary. But this necessarily leads to certain illusions.

One of these was that revolution is primarily a matter of heroism and will power on the part of the revolutionaries: that the revolution in Egypt could and would be brought to a successful conclusion simply by occupying and defending Tahrir Square against all comers and repeating this in other cities until both the regime collapsed and all other evils were defeated. Heroism and will power are essential elements in any revolution but by themselves they are not enough.

It was necessary to recognize that the revolution was up against an extremely powerful and determined enemy: not just Mubarak and his immediate supporters, nor just the generals but an entire state and ruling class backed by international capital who would fight back again and again with both intelligence and utter ruthlessness. Defeating that enemy would require the revolutionaries - the demonstrators and street fighters of Cairo, Alexandria and Suez - to be able to lead and win the support of millions of other workers and peasants in the workplaces, small towns and villages of Egypt as a whole, and therefore to learn how to reach them and lead them.

This is no easy matter. It is not easy for older 'political' people who, unavoidably, have spent years talking primarily to each other and it is not easy for the newly politically awakened intoxicated with their triumphs on the streets to even recognize that this needs to be done. One million people in a square or four million people marching through a town is an awesome phenomenon: in the midst of such a throng it is hard to remember that in a society of nearly 90 million there are many millions more sitting at home, some sympathetic, some not, observing the battles on the streets considering

whether or not to throw in their lot with the revolution or stick with the traditional order of things. And in the Egyptian Revolution this was particularly difficult for the many thousands of young street fighters for whom the revolution was their first and only political experience and who, inevitably, knew nothing of the history of previous revolutions and struggles.

To refer to the 'youth' of these revolutionaries is absolutely not to patronize or dismiss them. On the contrary they were the heroes of the revolution and its most precious asset. But if their youth and courage were priceless their lack of historical knowledge was a weakness and their necessity for the revolution's future created a problem for more experienced revolutionaries who had to try to steer a path between alienating such invaluable people and simply tail-ending their impetuous voluntarism and adventurism.

Nevertheless it was necessary to insist on the need to put forward demands and develop a political practice that related to workers in the factories and peasants in the villages. Also essential was an electoral engagement. Of course this cut against the grain of many of the most ardent revolutionaries but the truth is that all the old arguments going back, at least, to Lenin and *Left Wing Communism* continued to apply. Not to contest elections was not to undermine the system but simply to leave that field open to the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. Naturally an effective electoral intervention involved compromise - the Revolutionary Socialists for example were too weak to mount such an intervention on its own - but it is possible that there could have been an effective mobilization by the far left around Hamdeen Sabahi's presidential bid. Objections that Sabahi was 'unprincipled' or 'an opportunist' are true but miss the point that revolutionaries have to base their position not on an assessment of the individual's character or integrity but on the objective significance of the candidate's programme and campaign. In 2012 of the possible candidates Sabahi's campaign probably repre-

sented the most progressive development.¹⁴

It was also necessary to vote in the final round of the Presidential election in 2012 for the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi against the candidate of the military, Ahmed Shafiq. No matter how unpalatable this may have seemed that facts were that Shafiq was the last prime minister under Mubarak and his victory would have been a triumph for the counterrevolution and an invitation to cut the revolution's throat, as Shafiq made clear at the time. As we know the whole idea of voting - in any circumstances - for the Muslim Brotherhood was anathema to many on the left both in Egypt and internationally, which raises not only the arguments about tactics and against ultra-leftism in general but also, and once again the nature of Islamism and specifically of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Problem of Islamism

There are few problems that have caused so much confusion and disorientation on the left over the last twenty years both in the Middle East and globally as the question of Islamism (otherwise known as Political Islam or, erroneously, as Islamic Fundamentalism).

One reason for this disorientation is the pressure created by the fact that since the 'collapse of communism' in 1989-91, and especially since 9/11 and 'the War on Terror' the US and its allies have made Islamism their principle ideological target and Islamophobia the main contemporary form of racism. This has combined with the commitment of many on the left to a form of enlightenment secularism that is blind to its own class character and to its usefulness to imperialism, whether it is on the question of the veil in France or justifying war on Afghanistan and Iraq.

Another contributing factor is the merger in much of Global South of the Stalinist Communist tradition with middle class nationalism and anti-imperialism, usually under the banner of the stages theory of rev-

olution. As a result of this there emerged a 'left' in many undeveloped countries which was based among the intelligentsia and quite separated from the working class masses whom it tended to view as 'backward' and 'religious'. And for this left the project of change and socialism was very much a project of state capitalist economic development and modernization. This in turn led to a view of Islamism as even more of an enemy than the capitalist state and its armed forces.

All of this applied to a considerable extent to many on the Egyptian left both before and after the Revolution. At the same time the experience of the Egyptian Revolution demonstrates very clearly the necessity of a Marxist understanding of the whole phenomenon of Islamism and specifically of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.. Much of the theoretical work for this has been done, the key text being Chris Harman's path breaking analysis of 1995, 'The Prophet and the Proletariat'. Here I will simply summarise in bullet point form what seem to me to be key points.

1. It is necessary to make an historical materialist analysis of all religious movements including Islamism. This means starting not from their professed doctrine but from the social forces which they express and represent.
2. Contemporary Islamism is in general not a throw back to the 8th century or the middle ages or even an attempt to revert to such times. Rather it is a modern response to the modern phenomenon of imperialism, conditioned by the inadequacy of the nationalist and Stalinist responses.
3. Just as there are many different political tendencies with a Christian colouration, ranging from Protestant Unionism in Northern Ireland to the Theology of Liberation in Latin America, so there are many different Is-

¹⁴As Wassim Wagdy has pointed out to me there was also the candidacy of Khaled Ali, who came from the radical left and who got about 140,000 votes. Khaled Ali was clearly politically better than Sabahi but he was also not really a serious player in the election.

lamisms of very different political character depending on their specific economic, social and political circumstances. Hamas is not at all 'the same' as ISIS and neither are 'the same' as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. A concrete analysis has to be made.

4. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was a cross class phenomenon. Its leadership was middle class and committed to capitalism but it was not the main party of the Egyptian bourgeoisie or even its second choice. It had developed a serious mass base among the lower middle class, the poor and even sections of the working class. It built this in large part by moving into the 'welfare' space vacated by the retreating neo-liberal state and became a substantial provider of services to the poor. Indeed it was both under Mubarak and after his fall the only real mass political organization in the country, dwarfing all others.
5. The Muslim Brotherhood was seen by the masses the main opposition to the Mubarak regime. It was subject to sustained repression under that regime and although it was slow to support or join the 25 January Revolution its members, especially its youth, fought heroically in the Battle of the Camel and on other occasions.
6. The MB had some of the features of a socially conservative religious/ nationalist organization, like Sinn Fein or Fianna Fail in the past. It also, because of its social base had some features of a reformist organization. It is a mistake to think that reformism only takes a shape that copies or resembles classic social democracy. Reformism derives from the contradiction in the consciousness of the working class between wanting a better society but lacking the confidence to create it themselves. It can therefore find expression in a wide variety of political formations ranging from the SNP to Syriza and the Muslim Brotherhood.

These formations are not, of course, 'the same' - there is a spectrum with the Muslim Brotherhood at the conservative end of it and Syriza at the left ('Marxist') end but what unites them is that they all promise a better world, a new beginning, real democracy etc, etc, but they all propose to deliver these good things while running capitalism.

Failure on the part of many on the left to grasp these points had very serious consequences. It led to an exaggerated fear that the Brotherhood was about to establish a theocratic dictatorship and to the radically false concept of Islamic fascism. It led to the terrible failings of the Muslim Brotherhood government which derived from its refusal to challenge the system or the state being attributed specifically to the Brotherhood. And it led to the disastrous conclusion by some that Al-Sisi and the military were a 'lesser evil' than the Brotherhood. All of this culminated in the events of 30 June - 3 July 2013.

The Coup

The events leading up to and surrounding the 3 July military coup posed what in my opinion were exceptionally difficult political and tactical problems for revolutionaries. It should be said at the outset that virtually everyone on the left, in Egypt and internationally (and I include myself in this) failed to grasp correctly what was happening in those days. Before trying to analyze this let's briefly recap the main events.

In April 2013 a small group of activists led by Mahmoud Badr established an organization called Tamarod (Rebellion) which launched a petition of no confidence in President Morsi and demanded early elections. They said their aim was to collect 15 million signatures i.e. more than the 13 million votes with which Morsi had won the election. The petition gained massive popular support. Eventually Tamarod claimed, though the claim has not been verified, over 22 million signatures. On the basis of this Tamarod called on the Egyptian to come

onto the streets in a huge demonstration on 30 June.

The 30 June demonstration in Cairo, and elsewhere in Egypt, was indeed huge. There are claims that with 14 million or more on the streets it was the largest demonstration in world history. Whether or not this figure is accurate or the claim true it is absolutely beyond question that the mobilization was utterly immense. The helicopter video footage leaves no room for doubt.¹⁵ The next day a million people occupied Tahrir Square .

Then on the 3 July, after continuing protests, the army, led by General Al-Sisi, intervened to arrest Morsi and other Brotherhood leaders and to depose the government. This was met with acclaim by many of those on the streets. The Brotherhood responded by insisting on the 'legitimacy' of the Morsi presidency and their government and by organizing their own continuous street protests. They established two street sit-ins, one near Cairo University in Giza and a larger one at Rab'aa in Nasr City. After nearly six weeks of ongoing protest on the 14 August the Al-Sisi regime dispersed the sit-ins by means of brutal massacres killing at the very least, i.e. by their own admission, 638 MB supporters and injuring and arresting thousands more.¹⁶ The counter revolutionary coup was now firmly in place and sealed in blood.

The problem that has to be acknowledged and confronted is that the revolutionaries and the left, including the Revolutionary Socialists (clearly the most serious and principled socialist organization in Egypt) had supported and participated in the Tamarod campaign, and hailed the 30 June demonstrations as a 'revolutionary wave'. Also when the military intervened on 3 July the Revolutionary Socialists did not support this but did believe that it would

prove a kind of 'soft coup' which would not seriously derail or halt the onward march of the Revolution.

So was it a mistake ever to have supported the Tamarod petition and movement? This question has particular force since it has subsequently come out that Mahmoud Badr and the Tamarod leaders were in league with the military from the outset and after the coup they backed all the repression including the 14 August massacre. Nevertheless I would not make this criticism. I think it was impossible not to support Tamarod at the beginning. It appeared to have developed out of the revolution and it couched its demands in the language of the revolution and in terms of developing the revolution. Moreover it was backed by the April 6 Youth Movement, the main organization of revolutionary youth, and there is no doubt that it articulated genuine grievances felt by the Egyptian masses.

When it became clear that Tamarod was aligning itself with the military, as for example when it was endorsed by Ahmed Shafiq and the endorsement was accepted¹⁷, it was necessary for revolutionaries to break with it and the Revolutionary Socialists did so albeit only at the last moment¹⁸. But it was still necessary to participate in the 30 June mass demonstrations. This was a real revolt from below, a real upsurge of the masses on the basis of issues - economic hardship and democracy - that socialists support. Socialists could not sit at home with folded arms saying we don't like the leaders, we're having nothing to do with it *It should be remembered that the March to the Winter Palace in 1905 which resulted in the Bloody Sunday massacre and sparked the 1905 Revolution was led by the priest Father Gapon who turned out to have been a police agent..* Unfortunately there was also a real mass mobilization of the counter revolution on the

¹⁵See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLnD_8nbM1c. However it should be noted that this is an army helicopter.

¹⁶ According to Human Rights Watch which called it 'one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history', a minimum of 817 people were killed in Rab'aa Square alone and the Muslim Brotherhood claimed about 2,600. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_2013_Rabaa_massacre

¹⁷*Daily News* (18 May 2013) <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/05/18/tamarod-clarifies-shafiq-endorsement/>

¹⁸Wassim Wagdy has informed me that he thinks the Revolutionary Socialists were late in making this break and failed to make the break public - a 'big mistake' in his words.

streets in **the same place**, at **the same time**. Revolutionaries had to take part with the aim of winning the masses to a revolutionary perspective. The problem was that the consciousness of the masses was hugely uneven and the military were able to exploit this to intervene, ostensibly on behalf of the masses, in reality to establish their own dictatorship.

Our *weakness* was our inability to stop this happening or to rally the masses against it. This weakness was a product of the balance of forces - the fact that socialist ideas still had relatively little traction and that massive illusions in the army were still prevalent, even among many would be revolutionaries. (It must be remembered that the army had **not** been used publicly and in a mass way against the 2011 revolution). If all the so-called progressive forces, the liberals, the left and so on - the El Baradei's and Hamdeen Sabahi's etc - who claimed to embody the spirit of the Revolution had raised their voices against the military such a rallying of the masses might have been possible. But they did not; overwhelmingly they backed the military.

In these circumstances our *mistake* was to be too slow to see what was happening. It is in general right and essential for revolutionaries to be inspired by the masses on the streets but in this instance we allowed ourselves to be somewhat mesmerized and intoxicated by the sheer numbers and thus not were clear enough about the imminent danger. We simply assumed that the risen people would be able to sweep the generals aside or at least prevent the consolidation of their power. We underestimated the unevenness in their consciousness. 14 August came as a rude and terrible awakening.

This was a mistake but an understandable one and in the wider scheme of things relatively minor.¹⁹ But it is worth learning the lesson. It is worth remembering that there are moments when the right and the counterrevolution can also mobi-

lize masses on the streets, particularly when those masses face desperate circumstances and do not see a progressive alternative. Sameh Naguib of the Revolutionary Socialists has made this point in a very insightful interview which I have listened to but do not have a transcript of. He also explains the astute way in which Al-Sisi and the generals were able to build mass support by playing on a raft of people's concerns. These included the fear of the Coptic Christians (10 percent of the population) that they would be persecuted by the Morsi Government and Islamism, public concern about the breakdown of 'security' and 'order' which became a real worry in circumstances in which the state apparatus was barely functioning (in order to sabotage the Brotherhood). All of which reinforces, as he says, the need of revolutionaries to take these questions of oppression very seriously.

Preparing for the Future

In Egypt, and across the Middle East, there are now millions of people who have participated directly in revolution. They are currently dispersed, cowed and demoralized. But, as we argued in the first part of this article, the time will come when that will change and when it does those people will remember and learn from the experiences of 2011-13, just as in 1917 the workers of Petrograd remembered and learned from the revolution of 1905. In the meantime everything in this article is written with a view to preparing for this future in Egypt and internationally. All revolutions have their national peculiarities but they also have a huge amount in common, numerous features that derive not from their location but their character as revolutions.

These arguments are not addressed to thin air. They are written for those actively engaged in the difficult work of building for the next revolutionary upsurge, the most important element of which is the

¹⁹The Revolutionary Socialists published an article about 6 days after the coup saying that the army is bringing back Mubarak's regime and bringing stability to the ruling class, 'Telling us to stop strikes now'. Also, on 26 July, when Sisi asked for people to go onto the streets to give him 'authorization' to stop terrorism. The RS were the only political group to issue a statement condemning this and calling on people not to go on the demo and warning that such planned demos would cause the loss of the revolution. [I owe these points to Wassim Wagdy].

building of a revolutionary party. The revolutionary is the memory of the working class, the means by which these collective experiences of struggle which both the counter revolution and the reformists will try to expunge from history can be analysed and transmitted to the next generation.

If we examine the key arguments advanced in this article and the key turning points in the Revolution they all point to the necessity of building the revolutionary party. The problem of fighting for the strategy of permanent revolution against all versions of stages theory; the problem of avoiding revolutionary intoxication and reaching out to the masses beyond the squares; the problem of ultraleftism based on inexperience; the problems of tactics and correctly estimating complex and contradictory situ-

ations: all of these require a revolutionary party and one with real roots in the working class. As Lenin put it it: It is, in fact, one of the functions of a party organisation and of party leaders worthy of the name, to acquire, through the prolonged, persistent, variegated and comprehensive efforts of all thinking representatives of a given class, the knowledge, experience and-in addition to knowledge and experience-the political flair necessary for the speedy and correct solution of complex political problems. ²⁰

Many thanks are due to Anne Alexander and Wassim Wagdy for reading the draft of this article and for their helpful comments. Needless to say any errors in the article and its main political judgments are entirely my responsibility.

²⁰V.I.Lenin, *Left Wing Communism - an Infantile Disorder*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch08.htm>