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REFLECTIONS ON THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION¹

*All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*

- W.B. Yeats, Easter 1916

*'Eshararb, eshararb! (the people, the people!) ... the most beautiful sight I
have seen in my life'*

- Tweet from Hossam el- Hamalawy describing the scene in Tahrir
Square

What occurred in Egypt between the 25 January, when the Revolution began, and the 11 February, when Mubarak fell, 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 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.

¹ *This article is what it says, reflections, not a systematic account or analysis of the Revolution which is unfinished and ongoing and for which I do not have the resources. It should be read in conjunction with Rabab El-Mahdi & Philip Marfleet, *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, London 2009} and International Socialism Journal 130, which contains important articles by Alex Callinicos, Philip Marfleet and other material and the excellent article by Mustafa Omar 'The Spring of the Egyptian Revolution' <http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/30/spring-of-the-revolution>.*

This major miracle involved numerous minor miracles on the way: the miracle of 25 January, the initial 'day of rage' called by the 6th April Movement when the turnout on the streets vastly outnumbered all expectations, as did the determination of the demonstrators to stay on the streets, their willingness to fight and if need be die, which ended up giving its name to the whole revolutionary process; the miracle of The Battle of 6 October Bridge on 28 January, the 'Friday of Anger', when a large mass of protesters from Giza, west of the Nile, were marching to join the occupation of Tahrir Sq in downtown Cairo and were met by a police road block at the bridge. Anyone who has been in that situation [I remember something like that at Welling when the Anti Nazi League attempted to march on the headquarters of the BNP in 1994] knows that when armoured cops with vans etc block a limited space it is close to impossible to break through. But the crowd did breakthrough. They simply marched into the police lines, into truncheons, tear gas and water cannon, were beaten back and marched again, and were beaten back again and marched again and again until eventually the cops fled and the people took the bridge.² Even the bourgeois commentator on Sky News felt moved to note the 'extraordinary courage' of the demonstrators. Then the miracle of the Battle of the Camel on 3 February. After the victory of forcing the withdrawal of the police from the streets on 29 January, there was a slight lull in the struggle, the protesters rested on their laurels for a moment, perhaps went home for a rest, and the numbers in Tahrir Square dwindled. At this point the regime counterattacked. So -called 'pro-Mubarak supporters' assembled and marched on Tahrir with the clear aim of driving the revolutionaries out of the Square and crushing the Revolution. Initially the western media reaction was to take these 'Mubarak supporters' at face-value and see this as evidence of a basic division in 'the people'. I also heard commentators say that this 'changed the situation completely' and that the anti- democracy protesters were 'dismayed and demoralised' and 'didn't know what to do'. In fact the revolutionaries knew exactly what to do: in the words of Phil Marfleet 'they fought like demons', against clubs, rocks, machetes, Molotov cocktails, men on horseback with whips and indeed the legendary camel, to defend the Square until such time as word could get out to the rest of Cairo and the massive anti- Mubarak majority could assert itself. By the end of the day I heard rather astonished and bemused media commentators saying 'It has to be said the Mubarak supporters are being routed'.

Another miracle was the self-organisation of the masses in Tahrir Square (which generated Hossam el- Hamalawy's observation at the head of this article): the improvised medical care; the communal food supplies; the alternating relays of fighters going to the front line while others took a break in the rear; the

² For footage on Youtube see

http://wn.com/BREAKING_NEWS_Civilians_fightback_Cairo_Egyptian_Army_on_6th_of_October_Bridge].

arrangements for charging mobile phones; the wonderful scene of the Copts saying mass for the revolution's martyrs protected by a ring of Muslims;³ and then of Muslims praying protected by Copts;⁴ the magnificent participation of women in the revolution⁵ and so on.

Moreover, these miracles in Cairo, most of which were recorded by the Western media, were being duplicated in cities the length and breadth of Egypt, especially Alexandria and Suez where the level of struggle and per capita involvement was if anything even higher than in the capital. This point is well made by Mustafa Omar who writes

But in Alexandria, the protesters didn't adopt a Tahrir Square strategy. They didn't wait for the police to attack. The protesters came out every single day in the tens and hundreds of thousands from every neighborhood and street to confront the police--they fought back against police bullets and tear gas over and over again, until they defeated the police.⁶

And it was in Suez that there were probably the highest proportion of martyrs and the first police station was burned down.

All this talk of miracles may seem a bit odd coming from a Marxist materialist but I am reminded that Lenin felt the same way.

*Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are capable of performing **miracles**, if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual progress.*

The Predicted Revolution

The Marxist explanation of these 'miracles' was provided by Tony Cliff when he was analysing the French May Events of 1968. 'The vast creative potential of unalienated men was glimpsed once again, as it had been at other revolutionary moments of history'. [Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall, *France; The Struggle Goes On*, Socialist Review Publishing, 1968]. And of course we must remember - with justified pride I think - that these amazing events were, in a general sense, predicted. In 2009 Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet published a collection of essays entitled *Egypt: The Moment of Change*. Rabab is an Egyptian academic and activist prominent in the

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HogwlmGww9Y&feature=related>

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqXfZTgOCOE&feature=related>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-TogXsrVl4>

⁶ <http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/30/spring-of-the-revolution>

Revolution. Philip Marfleet is the member of the British SWP who has had closest involvement with Egypt over the last 25 years.(It would be very interesting to compare the fate of the analysis in this book with that of the bulk of the standard academic texts on Egypt over recent years, most of which are now dramatically out of date). In 2008 I wrote the introduction to a book of photographs of Egyptian working people, *The Liberty of Appearing* by Yasser Alwan. It ended with these words

Concentrated in great cities like Sao Paolo, Seoul, Bombay, Canton, Mexico City and many others, this international working class possesses awesome potential power. Cairo is one of the greatest of these cities and the Egyptian working class is a key contingent in this international army.

Yasser Alwan's photographs do not give us the demos, strikes and uprisings, but they give us the people in all their human contradictions. It is highly appropriate that this exhibition should appear at a time when these people may be about to take 'the liberty of appearing' on the centre of the world stage. There is a chance, only a chance but a real chance nonetheless, that the young brick and shingle maker who shouldered a bucket the size of his torso and whose face is obscured by his own arm and the boy with folded arms who is on the front cover of this book will grow up to make history.⁷

But the truth is that neither Rabab nor Phil nor I possessed any special prophetic powers. Rather we were articulating an analysis of the impending Egyptian Revolution that was common ground in the International Socialist Tendency, and that had been outlined and developed in numerous meetings in the annual Marxism Festival in London and the Socialist Days conferences in Cairo. Moreover the fact that it was common ground in our Tendency was due first and foremost to the work of that tendency's founder, Tony Cliff. Cliff (original name Ygael Gluckstein) was a Palestinian Jew who became an Anti- Zionist and Trotskyist in the mid-1930s. He came to the conclusion that the Palestinians, despite the heroism of their long struggle, lacked the numerical, economic or political strength to defeat Zionism or liberate themselves, but instead of looking, as did the PLO, to the Arab rulers for support [Cliff was convinced those rulers would always betray the Palestinians]he looked to the Arab working classes. He wrote

The Palestinians have not the strength to liberate themselves. They do not even have the strength to achieve any serious reforms. They are not like blacks in South Africa, who have achieved very important reforms.... The key to the fate of the Palestinians and everyone else in the Middle East is in the

⁷ Yasser Alwan, *The Liberty of Appearing*, Peacock Imprint, London 2008 p.27.

hands of the Arab working class whose main centres of power are in Egypt, and less so in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries.⁸

Hence Cliff adopted the slogan, also used in Egypt, 'The road to Jerusalem lies through Cairo'. Indeed it is astonishing now to read one of Cliff's earliest works *The Middle East at the Crossroads*, written in 1945, when he was twenty eight, and to find not only that he clearly identified the crucial importance of middle Eastern oil for imperialism and likewise Imperialism's use of Zionism as a bulwark against the Arab national movement, but also discusses not just the Arab working class in general but specifically wages and conditions at the Mahalla el Kubra textile factory, which played such a key role over the last few years in the run up to the Revolution and in the Revolution itself.

...open and hidden unemployment is very widespread and the conditions of the town workers are very bad. This can well be exemplified by describing the conditions of work in one big industry. Let us take the spinning and weaving works of Mahalla el Kubra, which employs 26,000 workers and 3,000 clerks, inspectors and managers. Beginners receive 1/6 a day, experienced workers 2/7, skilled workers 10 pounds a month. The workers have one day of rest a fortnight and work a ten-hour day. There is no social service and the doctor is there only to give permission for sick leave.
(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1945/12/mideast.htm>)

The Classic Revolution

Paradoxically one of the most surprising features of the Egyptian Revolution has been the very familiarity of many of its episodes and scenarios – at least familiarity to those who have studied the history of revolution and read the classic literature on the subject (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci etc).

The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events. In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, and history is made by specialists in that line of business – kings, ministers, bureaucrats... But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime.⁹

⁸ Tony Cliff, *The Jews, Israel and the Holocaust*, Socialist Review, May 1998
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1998/05/israel.htm>

⁹ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, London 1997, p.17.

These lines from Trotsky stand as exact description of what occurred in Egypt on 25 January and the days that followed.

'For revolution [Lenin wrote], 'it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers, or at least of the...politically active workers, should be willing to sacrifice their lives for it'. As we now know about eight hundred people were martyred in the struggle against with Mubarak's cops and paid thug 'supporters' but it was precisely this readiness to die that made victory in the battle of the streets possible.

*'Secondly'[says Lenin], ' the ruling class should be passing through a governmental crisis that draws even the most backward masses into politics – a symptom of every real revolution is a rapid, hundred-fold increase in the number of members of the toiling and oppressed masses – hitherto apathetic – who are capable of waging the political struggle.'*¹⁰

Again what an apt description of the gigantic popular mobilisations in Cairo, Suez, Alexandria and so on which continually reinforced the anti- Mubarak struggle and secured its triumph. On my recent post-Mubarak visit to Egypt it was possible to have political street conversations everywhere with taxi drivers, stall holders, waiters etc and faces invariably lit up at the greeting 'Mabrouk en thawra' ['Contratulations on the Revolution'].

Our Egyptian-American comrade Mustafa Omar was present in the revolution and has produced an excellent account of it. He notes:

I listened online to an amazing tape of a radio communication between the police headquarters in Alexandria and commanders in the field, trying to deal with the flood of angry protesters. In the tape, police officers are begging headquarters for reinforcements to deal with what they described as massive and dangerous crowds of 10,000, 20,000 and 30,000 people, closing in on them everywhere in the city.

But the headquarters was helpless because all of the officers in the field--literally all of them--were asking for reinforcements. The headquarters advised officers and units to retreat to the precincts, and the officers responded: "Sir, protesters are burning the precincts."

¹⁰ V.Lenin, *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Peking 1965, p.86.

The tape ends dramatically with the commander at headquarters asking a subordinate for an explanation for the police defeats. The officer simply told him: "Sir, it is over. The people are in the saddle." ¹¹

Compare this with the following passage from Trotsky describing an episode in the February Revolution in 1917.

General Ivanov telegraphed to the other "dictator," Khabalov, in Petrograd ten questions, to which he received succinct answers: We will quote them in full, for they deserve it:

Ivanov's questions: Khabalov's replies: 1. How many troops are in in the order and how many are misbehaving? 1. I have at my disposal in the Admiralty building four corn companies of the Guard, five squadrons of cavalry and Cossacks, and two batteries the rest of the troops have gone over to the revolutionists, or by agreement with them are remaining neutral. Soldiers are wandering through the towns singly or in bands disarming officers. 2. Which railroad stations are guarded? 2. All the stations are in the hands of the revolutionists and strictly guarded by them. 3. In what parts of the city is order preserved? 3. The whole city is in the hands of the revolutionists. The telephone is not working, there is no communication between different parts of the city. 4. What authorities are governing the different parts of the city? 4. I cannot answer this question? 5. Are all the ministries functioning properly? 5. The ministers have been arrested by the revolutionists. 6. What police forces are at your disposal at the present moment? 6. None whatever. 7. What technical and supply institutions of the War Department are now in your control? 7. I have none. 8. What quantity of provisions at is at your disposal? 8. There are no provisions my disposal. In the city on February 5 there were 5,600,000 pounds of flour in store. 9. Have many weapons, artillery and military stores fallen into the hands of the mutineers? 9. All the artillery establishments are in the hands of the revolutionists. 10. What military forces and the staffs are in your control? 10. The chief of the Staff of District is in my personal control. With the other district administrations I have no connections. ¹²

Then there is the question of the apparent spontaneity of the revolution, its 'leaderlessness', which pleases some bourgeois commentators and will no doubt be seized on by autonomists and anarchists (in ignorant comparisons with the Bolshevik

¹¹ <http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/30/spring-of-the-revolution>

¹² <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch06.htm>

led October Revolution – ignorant because the comparison should be with February 1917 not October). Precisely this point was dealt with by Gramsci

*The term "spontaneity" can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many sided. Meanwhile it must be stressed that "pure" spontaneity does not exist in history: it would come to the same thing as "pure" mechanicity. In the "most spontaneous" movement it is simply the case that the elements of "conscious leadership" cannot be checked, have left no reliable document. It may be said that spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the "history of the subaltern classes"... Hence in such movements there exist multiple elements of 'conscious leadership' but no one of them is predominant.*¹³

And by Trotsky, who devoted a whole chapter of his *History of the Russian Revolution* to this question in relation to the February Revolution, and concluded;

The mystic doctrine of spontaneousness explains nothing. In order correctly to appraise the situation and determine the moment for a blow at the enemy, it was necessary that the masses or their guiding layers should make their examination of historical events and have their criteria for estimating them. In other words, it was necessary that there should be not masses in the abstract, but masses of Petrograd workers and Russian workers in general, who had passed through the revolution of 1905, through the Moscow insurrection of December 1905, shattered against the Semenovskiy regiment of the Guard. It was necessary that throughout this mass should be scattered workers who had thought over the experience of 1905, criticised the constitutional illusions of the liberals and Mensheviks, assimilated the perspectives of the revolution....

*To the question, Who led the February revolution? we can then answer definitely enough: Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin. But we must here immediately add: This leadership proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution.*¹⁴

And by Tony Cliff in his study of Rosa Luxemburg

¹³ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, pp.196-97.

¹⁴ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch08.htm>

Revolutions do indeed start as spontaneous acts without the leadership of a party. The French Revolution started with the storming of the Bastille. Nobody organised this. Was there a party at the head of the people in rebellion? No... The same was true of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and February 1917. The 1905 Revolution started through a bloody clash between the Tsar's army and police on the one hand, and the mass of workers, men, women and children, on the other... Twelve years later, in February 1917, the masses, this time more experienced, and among whom there were a greater number of socialists than in the previous revolution, again rose spontaneously. No historian has been able to point a finger at the organiser of the February Revolution, for it was simply not organised.

However, after being triggered off by a spontaneous uprising, revolutions move forward in a different manner. In France the transition from the semi-republican government of the Gironde to the revolutionary one, which completely annihilated feudal property relations, was not carried out by unorganised masses without any party leadership, but under the decisive leadership of the Jacobin party. ...Similarly the October Revolution was not a spontaneous act but was organised in practically all its important particulars, including the date, by the Bolsheviks... And such a party was essential to raise the revolution from its initial stages to its final victory.¹⁵

And how well all these comments fit the reality of what Philip Marfleet calls 'Act One of the Egyptian Revolution' (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=721&issue=130>) with the role of the 6th April youth movement in calling 25 January, the role of the Revolutionary Socialists in organising feeder marches to Tahrir from the working class districts of Imbaba and Shubra, the role of the Muslim Brotherhood youth in defending the Square, and even the role of the Ultras (football hooligans) in fighting the police i.e. elements of conscious direction within an overall spontaneity at *the beginning* of the revolutionary process.

Then there was the wave of economic strikes that broke out in workplaces up and down the country just before and just after the fall of Mubarak, which immediately evoked Luxemburg's analysis of 105 years ago in *The Mass Strike*:

But the movement on the whole does not proceed from the economic to the political struggle, nor even the reverse. Every great political mass action, after it has attained its political highest point, breaks up into a mass of economic strikes...Every new onset and every fresh victory of the political struggle is transformed into a powerful impetus for the economic struggle, extending at the same time its external possibilities and intensifying the inner urge of the workers to better their position and their desire to struggle. After every foaming wave of political action a fructifying deposit remains behind from which a thousand stalks of economic struggle shoot forth. And conversely. The

¹⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1959/rosalux/5-partyclass.htm>

*workers' condition of ceaseless economic struggle with the capitalists keeps their fighting energy alive in every political interval.*¹⁶

Or the apparent paradox of such an immense and epic struggle producing in its triumph such seemingly limited results in terms of the new regime – from Mubarak to his long time supporter, Tantawi and the Supreme Army Council, with its curfews and laws banning strikes and marches – a paradox which has led more than one leftist I have met to discount the whole idea of an Egyptian Revolution. Once again Trotsky's History has a whole chapter ('The Paradox of the February Revolution') on the same phenomenon in the Russian Revolution:

The insurrection triumphed. But to whom did it hand over the power snatched from the monarchy? We come here to the central problem of the February revolution: Why and how did the power turn up in the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie?

...A minority of the revolutionary class actually participates in the insurrection, but the strength of that minority lies in the support, or at least sympathy, of the majority. The active and militant minority inevitably puts forward under fire from the enemy its more revolutionary and self-sacrificing element. It is thus natural that in the February fights the worker-Bolshevik occupied the leading place. But the situation changes the moment the victory is won and its political fortification begins. The elections to the organs and institutions of the victorious revolution attract and challenge infinitely broader masses than those who battled with arms in their hands.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch09.htm>

In Egypt we can say that the very scale of the mobilisation that swept Mubarak away meant that it involved large masses of the formerly 'non-political' who hated the regime but were a long way from fully understanding it. For thirty years this regime had presented itself, on every street corner, as virtually an extension of the personality of its leader. Many of the masses, though they deeply rejected this 'personality', nonetheless took it at face-value and attributed all the evils they suffered to the rule of this one individual. When Mubarak fell, some – not all, of course – of these masses joined with the sympathetic but passive majority (fifteen million is vast but still a minority of eighty million) in temporary acceptance of the 'new' military government, or at least the notion of giving it 'a chance'. Interestingly Marx makes a similar point about mass working class consciousness in relation to another February Revolution, that of France in 1848.

Therefore, in the minds of the proletarians, who confused the finance aristocracy with the bourgeoisie in general; in the imagination of the good old republicans who denied the very existence of classes or, at most, admitted them as a result of the constitutional monarchy; in the hypocritical phrases of

¹⁶ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/ch04.htm>

*the factions of the bourgeoisie which up to now had been excluded from power, the rule of the bourgeoisie was abolished with the introduction of the republic. At that time all the royalists were transformed into republicans and all the millionaires of Paris into workers. The phrase which corresponded to this imaginary abolition of class relations was fraternité, universal fraternization and brotherhood. This pleasant abstraction from class antagonisms, this sentimental reconciliation of contradictory class interests, this visionary elevation above the class struggle, this fraternite, was the real catchword of the February Revolution.*¹⁷

Naturally none of this is intended to suggest that the Egyptian Revolution is somehow a mere copy or repetition of the Russian Revolution or other past revolutions, or that it does not contain radically new and specific elements and features. Least of all would I want to suggest that it does not require *sui generis* analysis (which this article does not pretend to and can hardly be done from Dublin) after all the essence of Marxism is always 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation' (Lenin). What these quotations from the classical Marxists do demonstrate, however, is that there are deep continuities in the history of working class struggle and revolution and that the Egyptian Revolution stands firmly in that tradition.

Here it is perhaps necessary to reassert the working class character of the mobilisations that constituted the Revolution. The bourgeois media, of course, go out of their way to deny this, partly because their class prejudices incline them to deny the revolutionary capacities of the working class and partly because workers' revolt is what they most fear. Consequently they leap at the chance to talk about a 'middle class revolution' or a 'facebook revolution' or a 'youth revolution'. They said the same thing about 1968¹⁸ and even the British Poll Tax Revolt of 1989-90. So let us be clear: even though it is true that people from all classes (except the core of the ruling class) took part, including many middle class youth, the numbers and militancy involved could not possibly have been achieved without the active participation of millions of workers.

It is necessary to remember that white collar workers who live by the sale of their labour power – call centre workers, office workers (eg the Tax Collectors), hospital workers, teachers etc. - are workers too, not just manual workers, and that having had some education does not at all prevent you being working class. Also many young workers will have participated in the demonstrations as individuals or informal groups, rather than as identifiable trade union or workplace contingents (exactly the

¹⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch01.htm>

¹⁸ For a comprehensive refutation see Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, London, 1988.

same happened in Paris in '68 – I recall sitting in an occupied hall in the Sorbonne with about twenty 'students' and being amazed to discover that none of them were actually students). In such circumstances these workers will tend to be eclipsed by more middle class elements, like Wael Gonheim and Gigi Ibrahim, who will be seized on and promoted as spokespersons by the media, as they seized on Tariq Ali and Danny Cohn-Bendit in 1968. We also need to stress once again that it was the spread of indubitably working class strike action in 8-11 February that finally compelled Mubarak's departure.

Regarding the role of Facebook/Twitter/blogging there is an article "Social media and social movement" by Jonny Jones in *International Socialism Journal* 130.¹⁹ I would simply add that the internet and its derivatives constitute an important development in the means of communication (an aspect of the forces of production) which are inevitably dominated by the bourgeoisie but which revolutionaries, and the workers movement generally, should obviously make use of. The development of the printing press played a significant role in the Reformation (essentially a precursor to the bourgeois revolution) especially with regard to the translation of the bible from Latin into the vulgate, and it has been extensively used by socialists ever since; in the French Revolution there were newspapers, especially Marat's *Ami du Peuple* and also the paintings of David; the siege of Paris, prior to the Commune saw the use of hot air balloons for the sending of messages over the heads of the German army; the Russian Revolution used not only newspapers but also the telegraph and photography and film (Rodchenko, Eisenstein, Vertov etc); in May 68 the silk screen poster was king. But in none of these cases was the character of the revolution determined by its means of communication – in all of them it was determined by the class and political position of the masses involved. The internet, facebook et al are very helpful in that they are a) interactive rather than a centralised means of broadcasting; b) more or less instantaneous; c) global; d) more difficult than print, radio or TV to censor. Many of the British and European left, who have grown old in the long years of downturn, have been slow on the uptake in this area – I am a prime example - and urgently need to catch up. But we should not exaggerate or fall for hype: these new media do not stand above or outside of society and its class relations; they are not at all immune to state repression as Egypt proved when the entire internet was shut down for several days; nor does or did the revolution depend on them – mass mobilisations continued and increased when the net was down; above all they are not a substitute for people on the street and in the workplaces, and trade union and political organisation.

¹⁹ <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=722&issue=130>

The 'classic' i.e mass working class character of the Egyptian Revolution is thus a tremendous vindication of those who have defended the original Revolutionary Marxist perspective of socialism as the self emancipation of the working class against all its bourgeois, reformist, Stalinist and postmodernist nay-sayers over the years. It is also the basis for forming a perspective on the dynamic and future development of the Revolution. This can best be done through the frame of the theory of permanent revolution, first formulated by Marx in 1850 and elaborated by Trotsky in 1905-6 and then again in the 1930s. This theory deals with the question of how a democratic revolution can develop into a proletarian socialist revolution. But before returning to this issue it is necessary to comment briefly on the prospects of a different destination for the Revolution – one that is raised as a bogey by some and hoped for by others, namely the establishment of an Islamist regime.

An Islamic Revolution?

So pervasive has been the atmosphere of Islamophobia generated by western politicians and media over the last twenty years or so that the initial reaction to the Arab revolutionary wave of many commentators, especially from the right but also sometimes from the liberal 'left', was to say that no good would come of it as it would only end in 'something worse', by which they meant an Islamic Regime a la Iran. For such people the mere fact the Arab peoples are overwhelmingly Muslim meant that no other outcome was at all likely, rather as if one were to respond to news of revolutionary upheavals in Venezuela, Bolivia or Argentina with the view that they would only end in Catholic theocracy. This is a 'logic' which should be utterly rejected. What then are the real prospects for political Islamism in Egypt at present?

We must start from the indisputable fact that the, mainly young, people who initiated the 25 January did not do so with any kind of Islamist agenda – their aims were secular and democratic. Moreover this remained the overall tenor of the movement throughout the Revolution. However, it is also an indisputable fact that, prior to the Revolution and up to the present, the Muslim Brotherhood constitutes far and away the largest and best organised opposition grouping in the country, in terms of membership far larger than all the liberal, Nasserist and left organisations put together. As one young comrade in Alexandria put it to me, 'there is only one Leninist organisation in Egypt and that is the Brotherhood – unfortunately they are not Leninists'. But neither are they Al Qaeda or 'fundamentalists' or 'extremists'. Rather they are a highly contradictory, moderate, conservative, reformist, cautious tendency similar in many respects to right wing social democracy in Europe. Their leadership and core membership is middle class (a mixture of middle and small businessmen and higher professionals) but they also have substantial popular

support among students and the urban poor, and their political policy is to tack between these different bases.²⁰

At the beginning of the Revolution the Muslim Brotherhood **opposed** the mobilisation for the 25 January (in a manner reminiscent of the French CP in May '68). Then, when they saw the scale of the movement and came under massive pressure from their own younger supporters, they 'allowed' their members to participate. All accounts I have heard testify to the fact that the MB youth fought heroically and, because of their high level of organisation, very effectively to defend Tahrir Square, especially in the Battle of the Camel. This, by the way, was an important vindication of the united front strategy towards the Brotherhood adopted, against the grain of much of the old Egyptian left, by our comrades. But the moment Mubarak fell the Brotherhood transferred its allegiance to the new regime, started to do deals with the military, opposed strikes and further demonstrations, arguing that now is the time 'to build Egypt', and supported the right wing and army position i.e. Vote Yes, in the referendum on Constitutional Reform. At the same time this has produced all sorts of tensions and splits within the organisation, especially among the youth, many of whom want a more radical policy.

If we assume that some kind of stabilisation occurs on the basis of the current state of affairs – **not** an assumption that can be made with confidence – and the elections scheduled for the autumn go ahead, the Brotherhood will have a strong chance of becoming a significant part of the government, probably in alliance with rebranded old regime candidates and/or representatives of the military. This will not turn Egypt into Iran but will lend the MB's considerable political weight to a right wing 'moderate' pro-capitalist settlement, with a highly 'controlled' and restricted democracy.

To the right of the Brotherhood stand various Salafi groupings, who are far more conservative and 'fundamentalist'. Under Mubarak they were largely 'non political' but since the Revolution and the relative freedom that has been achievement they have emerged much more openly onto the political stage. In the present situation they constitute a highly reactionary force attempting to stir up sectarian hatred against both Coptic Christians and Sufi Muslims.²¹ I am told by Egyptian comrades that in numerical terms the Salafis are considerably larger than the Brotherhood but they are divided into many sub-groups and are much less organised. In Qena, the main city in Upper Egypt (the far south), the Salafis, along with the Brotherhood, have orchestrated a mass campaign against the Christian Governor (mayor) Major General Emad Mikhael, demanding a Muslim mayor. However the matter is complex

²⁰ For a more substantial analysis of the MB prior to the Revolution see Sameh Naguib 'Islamism(s):old and new' in El-Mahdi and Marfleet, *Egypt: The Moment of Change*

²¹ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/apr/11/salafis-attack-sufi-mosques>

because Mikhael was a Mubarak loyalist and as *Al Masryalyoum* reports ‘ some protesters said they did not reject Mikhael for being a Copt, but rather for taking part in killing protesters during the 25 January revolution’.²² But in the view of leading Egyptian Marxist, Sameh Naguib (in personal discussion) the reactionary sectarian element is the predominant one in the campaign.

Since writing the above a further horrible Salafi attack has occurred on a Coptic church in Imbebe, a poor district in north west Cairo, which resulted in armed confrontation, 12 deaths and 180 injuries. The military have responded by sending 190 people to trial in Military Courts, which may put a break on the Salafis, but is dangerous as it legitimises the use of these courts which are also used for repression against the democracy protesters and the left.

So clearly Salafism does represent a significant threat, but I am not in a position to offer a precise estimation of how serious this is. The way it seems to me, and I am tentative about this, is that the prospects for the Salafis as an independent force in their own right are very limited but as a more or less covert weapon in alliance with the military they can be used to try to roll back and break up the magnificent unity that was forged in the Revolution. The fate of Salafism is thus tied to the overall fate of the Egyptian Revolution: will it go forward or will it be thrown back? This in turn brings us back to the question of permanent revolution.

The Permanent Revolution

The theory of permanent revolution was developed by Trotsky in 1905-6 in response to the Russian Revolution of 1905 (the dress rehearsal for 1917) and in opposition to the ‘stages theory’ of revolution then dominant on the Russian and European left. According to this ‘stages theory’, which was wrongly attributed to Marx, socialist revolution could not come on the historical agenda until after society had passed through a substantial phase of capitalist development and therefore what was required in Russia (and the maximum that was historically possible) was a bourgeois led democratic revolution against Tsarism similar to the French Revolution of 1789 followed by period of stable constitutional democracy in which Russian society would mature economically and socially and the proletariat would be able to gradually strengthen its organisations a la German Social Democracy in preparation for an eventual struggle for socialism. Trotsky argued that the contradictions in Russian society would permit such an orderly development.

In the first place he said that the Russian bourgeoisie was too weak, too cowardly and too tied to international capital to make or lead a revolution: only the working class would be able to overthrow Tsarism. But in overthrowing Tsarism the dynamics

²² <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/422224>

of the revolutionary struggle would lead the working class to challenge capitalist interests and property relations. No stable period of bourgeois democracy would ensue. Either the revolution would develop into workers power or it would be thrown back into reaction. Moreover even if the working class took power in Russia it would not be able to sustain it in one country: rather the Russian Revolution would need, in order to survive, to spread to other countries (especially Germany) and internationalise itself. In Russia in 1917 and after virtually every aspect of this perspective came to pass including, tragically, the destruction of workers power in the form of Stalinist counter- revolution, when the revolution failed to spread.

In relation to Egypt many millions of people, almost certainly a huge majority of the population (and probably most of the world's population too) would like to see the country become a stable economically developing 'genuine' (as they see it) bourgeois democracy with freedom of speech, free elections, less corruption and so on. But the fact that most people want something does not at all mean that it can or will happen. Most people would like there to be world peace. Most Irish people wanted the Celtic Tiger to continue indefinitely and so on. In the case of Egypt a number of factors militate against any straightforward stabilisation.

First, the complete absence up to now of democratic regimes throughout the middle east is no accident. The US, the dominant imperial power in the region , has systematically sustained dictatorships (including, of course, Mubarak) for the simple reason that this renders these regimes compliant to its will as opposed to democratic governments which would come under immense pressure from their electorates to go against US foreign policy, especially in regard to Palestine, Iraq and the underlying issue of oil. Far from overcoming this tension the Egyptian Revolution, and the Arab Spring as a whole, intensifies it. In other words, the US, despite Obama's rhetoric, will be pressing to drastically restrict the process of democratic reform in Egypt.

Secondly the Egyptian Revolution has occurred in response to, and in the context of a severe international economic crisis which is driving most governments round the world to go on to the offensive against their own people in terms of welfare cutbacks, privatisation, and unemployment, to which must be added the acute problem of inflation and rising food prices . 'Urban consumer inflation in Egypt accelerated to 12.1 percent in April, its highest in a year, on the back of soaring food prices which contributed to the mass protests that toppled President Hosni Mubarak earlier this year'.²³ But in Egypt the Revolution has created massive hopes and expectations of the exact opposite, of a dramatic improvement in the living standards of the masses through, for example, wage increases and the establishment of a decent minimum wage. The masses may make a revolution in the name of

²³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/10/egypt-inflation-idUSLDE74906920110510>

democracy but that is because they think that, among other things, democracy will bring them a measure of social and economic justice. Moreover the Revolution has given them the means, such as independent trade unions, and the spirit to fight for it. This will prove a very hard knot to unravel except by massive repression and the attempt at such repression risks the splintering of the state apparatus, i.e. the army rank-and-file going over to the people.

We must remember Gramsci's injunction that 'one can "scientifically" foresee only the struggle – not the concrete moments of the struggle which cannot but be the result of opposing forces in continuous movement'²⁴ but the likelihood is that there will be a confrontation of these opposed forces whether the forces concerned desire it or not. In such a situation the weaker the working class, the less organised, the less prepared it is, the more likely it is to be defeated and gain nothing from the Revolution for which it has paid in blood, or even worse, be crushed by a counter revolution which could produce a regime even more terrible than that of Mubarak.

At present, however, such a decisive confrontation is some way down the road. At the moment both the revolution and the counter-revolution, the working class and the capitalist class (currently represented primarily by the Supreme Army Council) are advancing on some fronts and retreating on others. Thus the Army tries to ban strike and demonstrations and is able to pass the law but is unable to enforce it. The Revolution retreats from the streets but then suddenly returns in force to demand the arrest of Mubarak. The regime retreats and actually arrests him and his sons. Then (5 May) they sentence the former Minister of the Interior, Habib el Adly, to twelve years for money laundering and today (10 May) the former Tourism Minister Zuhair Garranah has been jailed for five years for corruption. Do such concessions appease the movement and diminish its anger and size or do they encourage it? A bit of both. The Salafis whip up a sectarian storm in Qena but when they threaten the weakly sermon of the Coptic Pope, ten thousand including many youth from the 25 January and many Muslims turn out in solidarity. The regime imposes a curfew but the curfew is at 2.00 am so it doesn't have much effect.

What needs to be done by socialists in this situation cannot, in any detail, be specified from afar but what needs to be done in broad terms is pretty clear. On the one hand the democratic revolution must be pushed to completion. That means struggling for genuinely free and equal elections, not ones loaded in favour of bourgeois parties (as is the case at present with an electoral law that requires a party to have 5000 members and publish their names in a national newspaper at the cost of £500,000). It means fighting not just to remove one or two figure heads, but to cleanse public life of all the little Mubaraks, all the corrupt hangers –on, and all

²⁴ A.Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, p.438.

those responsible for murder and torture of protestors – the Portuguese, after the 1974 Revolution, called this process *saniemento*. It means fighting for full equality of citizenship, against all discrimination and sectarianism, especially against women and Christians.

On the other hand it means doing everything possible to raise the independence, combativity and consciousness of the working class. This involves seizing the moment to develop independent and democratic unions (as far as possible free of corrupt or treacherous bureaucratic officials). It means encouraging, strengthening and bringing together the Popular Committees to Defend the Revolution which were formed spontaneously by local areas when the regime started to unleash thugs and criminals and which have the potential to become embryonic workers' councils (soviets) and eventually replace the bourgeois state. It means developing a programme of economic and political ²⁵demands, like the demands for a minimum wage, for price control and for renationalisation of privatised industries that articulate and advance the interests and aspirations of the workers. Similarly it means developing demands which can align the peasants with the working class. This in turn means developing a workers' political party that can carry such a programme, work to win the leadership of the class and spearhead its struggle for power.

Fortunately all these tasks are being seriously undertaken by socialists in Egypt, especially our comrades in the Revolutionary Socialists, as I was able to see, first hand, on a recent visit. Young Revolutionary Socialists were the initiators of the dismantling of the hated State Security Offices, first in Alexandria, then in Cairo. Comrades are playing a key role in drawing together the numerous Popular Committees (there are forty in Alexandria alone) and likewise in building the independent unions. In particular they are strongly rowing in behind the proposal of the long standing militant and socialist Kamal Khalil for a new Democratic Workers Party, which has tremendous potential in the current situation. As Khalil explains this party does not begin with a fully socialist programme, so as to facilitate mass working class participation, but its demands are entirely socialist in spirit and there is every possibility that it can develop in a fully socialist direction rather congealing into a bureaucratic reformist social democratic or Stalinist formation.

An International Revolution?

From the very beginning Marx and Engels insisted that the struggle for socialism was an international one that could not be brought to conclusion in one country alone.

Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?

²⁵ See interview with Kamal Kahlil regarding this party and its programme <http://vimeo.com/23327371>.

*No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.*²⁶

As we have noted Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution reemphasised this point in relation to the Russian Revolution, and the ongoing process of economic, political and media global integration has made this interconnectedness more intense than ever before. The Egyptian Revolution was directly inspired by the success of the Tunisian Revolution. The fall of Mubarak was followed immediately by uprisings in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria – all within weeks. For a brief moment it appeared as if all the dictators in the Arab world were going to be overthrown in one great revolutionary wave. Sadly it was not so simple.

The enemies of the people – not just the individual dictators but the ruling classes whom they represent and the imperialist forces with whom these classes are in league, principally US imperialism, of course – do not give up easily and are more than capable of tenacious resistance, manouvers, and tactical retreats followed by returns to the offensive. The revolution in Libya succeeded in the east round Benghazi – because large sections of the military switched sides – but it failed in Tripoli where Gaddafi's security forces, and at least a section of the population, remained loyal and where Gaddafi struck the rebels down with absolute ruthlessness. As a result the country was divided and imperialism saw its chance and seized it with both hands. Under the fig leaf of a 'humanitarian' no-fly zone they launched a substantial air assault on Libya. This proved, probably by design, to be enough to stop Gaddafi's outright victory but not enough actually to defeat him. What it did do was reduce the Benghazi based rebels to a state of dependency on the western powers, while preparing the ground for the eventual partition of the country and securing a strong foothold for imperialism in the region. At the same time, just as the people's revolt in Bahrain had defeated the police, much as their Egyptian counterparts had done, the overwhelming intervention by the Saudi army (simply marching across the linking causeway) crushed the revolution there. These two interventions, almost certainly co-ordinated, changed the dynamic of events in the whole region. It took the bloom off the Arab Spring, halted its amazing upward trajectory and undoubtedly emboldened all the other rotten regimes including Bashir in Syria and Saleh in Yemen to believe they could weather the storm.

Nevertheless at the time of writing, and so fluid is the situation that anything I write may be out of date by the time it is read, not all revolutionary momentum has been lost. Heroic resistance is ongoing in Syria (to deafening silence from the West apart from token meaningless appeals for restraint) and the democratic revolution seems to be winning in Yemen. Wonderful things continue to happen. When President Saleh criticised Yemeni women's participation in the protest as un-Islamic tens of

²⁶ Frederick Engels, Principles of Communism 1847
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm>

thousands of women, many fully veiled, took to the streets in rebuttal.²⁷ Moreover, there remain huge resources of democratic and revolutionary energy among the Egyptian masses.

Clearly there is a strong reciprocal relationship between the fate of the revolutions in all the Arab countries. Every step forward by the revolution in one country, helps it to progress in all the other countries., while every reverse for one is a reverse for all.

However it would be a mistake to limit this reciprocity to the Arab world. Clearly the Arab revolutions have inspired people much further afield , from Wisconsin in the USA to the Maldives²⁸ and every dictator from Mugabe (who arrested fifty of our Zimbabwean comrades just for watching a film about Egypt) to Kim Jong-il is worried . Asia News reported on the 14 February 'The wave of protests that began in the Mideast appears to have reached even North Korea. For the first time in the history of the Stalinist regime, groups of ordinary citizens have protested in three cities demanding food and electricity'.²⁹ The Arab revolts and the Egyptian Revolution, witnessed live on TV by millions round the world, has strengthened the argument for resistance, struggle and revolution, everywhere.

As well as seeing the international *effects* of the Arab Revolutions we also need to grasp that they had international *causes*, especially in terms of rising food prices (to which climate change is a significant contributor) and the general crisis of capitalism that erupted in 2008. This enables us to see the Arab Revolutions as a whole and the Egyptian Revolution in particular not as an isolated Middle Eastern affair but has the highest point yet reached in a rising wave of struggle internationally that includes the eight general strikes in Greece, the general strike in Spain, the mass struggles over pensions in France, the fall of the government in Portugal, the workers' revolt in Wisconsin, Iceland's two referendums rejecting the IMF bail - out, the UK student rebellion and the huge trade union demonstration in London on 26th March and so on. Overall what we are seeing is a mass popular rejection of the attempt to make ordinary people pay for the crisis of the system, which is why all these different struggles resonate so strongly with one another.

If this is the case, and I believe it is, what we have entered internationally is a phase similar in some respects to that in 1968-74, which Chris Harman called 'The Fire Last Time'. Now that the fire this time has been lit we can expect new explosions and not just in the Arab world. Given the crisis of capitalism is continuing to deepen and that it is merging with the ever more urgent crisis of climate change, which as Harman

²⁷ For video footage see

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/04/2011416162256587141.html>

²⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13269801>

²⁹ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/First-public-protests-against-the-Kims%E2%80%99-regime-20861.html>

pointed out acts to intensify the class struggle, to say there is everything to play for is quite literally true.