

## **Assault on Consent: the role of hegemonic breakdown in worker protest in Egypt and the Gulf states since 2005**

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It should be no surprise that in Egypt, as elsewhere, worker protest has not stemmed simply from the objective contradictions of capitalism and class as some have tended to argue (Abbas 1967; Beinín and Lockman 1987; Beinín 1989). Historians have shown how Egypt's labour movements, from the late nineteenth century to the present, have owed much to nationalism, state regulation and intervention, different modes of leadership, crafts and service-workers (and other non-proletarian groups), moral economy, language, and gender, as well as historical and political crises and conjunctures (Alexander 2007; Chalcraft 2001, 2004; Goldberg 1986, 1992, 1996; Lockman 1994; Posusney 1993; Vatter 1994). Contra instinctive assimilations of all popular protest in Egypt to the industrial working class, it is worth remembering that the largest single action of the recent protests in Egypt was a successful strike, in December 2007, not of 'cloth-cap proletarians', but of 55,000 real estate tax collectors employed by local authorities.

Yet, rather than either championing or denigrating class analysis, or arguing yet again over the relative importance of class vis-à-vis other forms of identity and mobilization, it may be more fruitful to accept that class processes are regularly and perhaps inevitably combined with other political or cultural processes and conjunctures.

As Geoff Eley remarks: "between [objectivist] social history and [subjectivist] cultural history, there is really no need to choose" (Eley 2005: 181, 201). Just as exploitation works, say, through sexism and racism, as Vitalis has recently shown so effectively in regard to ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s (Vitalis 2007), so too does protest against exploitation work through cultural and political forms. Vitalis remarks that oppositional "politics can undo, at least in part, the order that ideas about markets, merit, culture, and race represent and sustain" (Vitalis 2007: 273). In this context, one task – beyond either economic *or* cultural determinism – is to develop understandings of how cultural, political and economic processes combine (dialectically or not) over time in the making of labour and popular protest.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony seems ideally suited to this task as it points towards political and cultural processes without ignoring the kinds of structural and objectifying contexts so emphasized by historical materialism. The idea of hegemony usefully refers to how political order and oppositional movements operate not just through obstruction, repression and violence, or through the machinations of material or self-interest, narrowly defined, but through channelling, institutionalizing, harnessing, and refining agency and subjectivity. I want to insist that the sort of consent envisaged by hegemony is both practical *and* ideational. It is both about norms, minds and values, *and* about energies, bodies, and practices. The historical process, and what E. P. Thompson called the 'grind' and 'spark' of struggle, does not respect the admitted analytical distinctions between these elements. This paper argues that studying the forging of consent – so central to the idea of hegemony – and the moments when that consent breaks down, can shed some useful light on both quiescence and protest among workers in Egypt and migrant workers in the Gulf. Here I want to focus in particular on

the labour protests in Egypt since 2004 – protests involving hundreds of thousands of workers and others, and hence the most widespread and significant there since independence in 1952. I will compare them to protests by migrant workers in a very different context, that of the Gulf countries since 2005, where collective action involving thousands of workers are the largest and most disruptive labour protests the Gulf states have ever seen.

The argument advanced here is mostly a hypothesis, as my empirical research is only in the early stages. But the idea is that the key hegemonic components of labour regimes in the Gulf and Egypt have been significantly eroded in the last few years. In Egypt, the Nasserist notion of social protection and national development in return for productive labour is in ruins amid extensive privatization of formerly public sector firms and the accompanying stripping away of social protections and ideas about inward-oriented national development. In the Gulf, rising costs and falling wages have struck a major blow against workers' ability to provide for families back home. In both cases, elements of a pre-existing hegemony have been broken down and this attrition has arguably played a major role in propelling protest. The pre-existing hegemony had activated numerous energies, forged consent and modes of collective identification and even ways of life – and so it is understandable how its dismantling involves protest. By making this argument I aim to avoid determinism and objectivism, while eschewing also the moralism, conservatism, abstract universalism, and statics of the moral economy approach.

## ***Egypt***

The period 2004-6 saw increasing numbers of strikes and collective protests in Egypt, but activism really took off after a massive and successful textile-workers' strike

in December 2006. During 2007, Egyptian Workers and Trade Union Watch reported more than 580 episodes of industrial action, with hundreds of thousands of participants.<sup>1</sup> Beinín has recently called this upheaval "the largest and most sustained social movement in Egypt since the campaign to oust the British after 1945". To understand the role of hegemonic breakdown, some background on the pre-existing hegemony are in order.

The establishment of a Nasserite hegemony in the 1950s and 1960s was the basis of worker quiescence during those decades. It was not that the irreducible demands of a self-acting proletariat were crushed after independence by repression, state power, nationalist ideological delusion, and the betrayal of the workers by urban intellectuals more interested in anti-imperialist, gesture-politics than class struggle (Beinín 1989). But nor was it that, in the static moral economy approach, industrial peace was secured because leaderships now restored conditions which did not violate worker norms and standards, "to which the subaltern class . . . [had] become accustomed and which it expects the dominant elites to maintain" (Posusney 1993: 85).

Beinín's story of coercion, material interest, and delusion does not give an adequate picture. First, while it is true that the Free Officers immediately met the labour movement with spectacular coercion, the colonial state had done likewise, but failed to crush the labour movement. Second, workers were nationalist and developmentalist themselves. No coincidence, indeed, that strikes under colonial rule were always more frequent in foreign-owned than locally-owned firms. Popular desires for Egyptian national self-determination and socioeconomic development – the latter meaning education, schooling, literacy, electricity, better housing, growing wealth and so on –

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Beinín, "Work is Politics: Egypt, bread riots and mill strikes" *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2008.

were real enough. The notion that workers should be productive and disciplined in the name of national development after independence in the context of nationalization and statist investment was hardly an ideological delusion foisted on workers who were then beguiled into betraying their true class interests. There were elements in this complex to which workers could sign up to without overt coercion. These elements of consent should not be understood as rational choices by individuals maximizing utility (Goldberg 1992), because choices were defined through and embedded in structures and histories, and utility was redefined over time, even unpredictably.

On the other hand, the new forms of consent were not forged in line with a static and unchanging moral inheritance, and nor were they made outside of the pressures and power of statist and monopolistic leadership. Nasserite hegemony insisted in corporatist mode that workers join state-controlled unions, give up their independent political role, and abandon the notion of irreducible class division and struggle, in return for economic development and social protection (shorter working hours, higher pay, pensions, sick pay, bonus pay, unemployment benefit, job security and the like). That Nasserist leaderships (including intellectuals) championed this formula worked its way into the construction and definition of workers interests, a process which formed part and parcel not of conservative restoration, but far-reaching change, and a language of change and progress. Doubters were persuaded by Nasser's apparently dazzling anti-imperial success on the Arab and Third Worldist stage after 1956. For the dissenters, the nout and the noose powerfully shaped social interests and perceptions of the desirable and the practical. In other words, principles of consent were forged in the heat of political leadership and changed over time – they did not involve static moral conformity to the *status quo ante*. Overall, leadership, and combinations of coercion and consent

channelled, harnessed and captured forms of popular agency and subjectivity. The formula that diminished labour protest in Egypt after independence was not simply repressive, nor rational, nor moral, but hegemonic. In the process, Nasserism appropriated many of the ideas of the communists, even while imprisoning their leaderships.

This hegemony engaged activities, bodies, and energies, not just norms and standards in which protection and development were to be the price of political quiescence and productive labour. This form of consensual practice became a way of life for hundreds of thousands of workers in the public sector (cf Shehata 2000). Such hegemony could withstand significant antagonism. Workers did strike, often or even overwhelmingly without the support of their official unions, but they evinced their loyalty to the existing hegemony by maintaining and even increasing production, for example, demonstrating their commitment to national development goals, even while occupying factories and locking out management (Posusney 1997).

It is precisely this hegemony which has come under threat since the 1970s, provoking protests, but in a far more intensive fashion since the later 1990s, and above all since 2004. First, no longer do Egyptian national leaderships play a starring role in the non-aligned movement, anti-colonial nationalism, pan-Arabism, Arab socialism, armed struggle, the liberation of Palestine and the like. After Egypt's ignominious defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967, Anwar Sadat drew Egypt towards the American fold, began a process of economic 'opening' (*infitah*), and signed a peace treaty with the Israeli 'enemy', sacrificing the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in the process on the altar of Egyptian national interests. No longer were leaders marching lock-step with the movement of nationalist and anti-colonial liberation, an important component of

Nasserite hegemony. If such sentiments were no longer important, one could never account for the far-reaching and intense popularity in summer 2006 of Hizbullah and its leader Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah, seen as one of the few non-corrupt Arab leaderships ready to stand up to and even defeat the Zionist enemy and the machinations of US imperialism.

Second, not only has the government failed to live up to promises of nationalism and development, but it has increasingly engaged on a direct assault on Nasserist social protections, and standards of living and real wages have fallen significantly, especially in recent times with swingeing price rises in basic commodities, even while a tiny minority benefit ostentatiously from economic liberalization. The Mubarak government signed up to a far-reaching programme of privatization at the behest of the IMF in 1991 in return for significant debt reduction – in turn a prize also for supporting the US in ousting Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. This programme is a direct assault on the social protections, jobs and wages of hundreds of thousands of public sector workers. Instead of enjoining and encouraging the productive exertions of its toiling sons of the nation, the government is ear-marking them for cut-backs and redundancy, and thereby consigning them to marginal status, economic misery, and slum-living. In this context also, the status and role of the state controlled unions, once at the centre of leadership rhetoric and practice, has diminished greatly.

Finally, there are relevant political and ideological changes. Not only has the state lost its monopoly of public discourse, partly through new satellite media, but, a significant, pro-democratic movement of mostly urban and middle class protest emerged for the first time in 2004 – the *kifaya* ('Enough!') movement – which broke a major taboo by criticizing Mubarak directly and opposing the succession of his son,

Gamal, to the presidency. Middle class protests are in part about the erosion of formerly secure middle class status and incomes in government employment, teaching, intermediate professions of all kinds. The significance of this is less that there is a direct organizational alliance between urban students and intellectuals and the workers in the countryside. There is not. But the charge of autocracy openly levelled at a government already vulnerable to the charge of collaboration with US imperialism is a factor in shaping a political climate of dissent, and working to produce a 'structure of feeling' enabling and valorizing protest and opposition. Small wonder that worker protests accelerated after 2004-05, when the *kifaya* movement came to prominence in Cairo.

Overall, the key components of Nasserist hegemony are under direct and now terminal assault – anti-colonial nationalism, the status and place of the state-controlled unions, the statist monopoly of leadership and discourse, promises of development and raised standards of living, and social protections for employees. No wonder that workers do not just demand pay rises, bonuses and subsidies, but seek to reclaim the central role they once had in overall programmes for Egyptian national and social development. As opposition labour journalists write, the labour movement does not just “demand its rights, but also demands its rightful place as a basic component on the map of social development in Egypt” (Bassiouni and Sa‘id 2007: 76). This articulates precisely the labour movement’s claim to the central place that labour had in Nasserist visions of national and economic development, but has now all but lost at the hands of distant, foreign, and wealthy technocrats and economists. It is this loss, in all its practical and ideational components, that drives worker grievance and protest. Arguably, indeed, the government’s awareness of the very fragile ground on which it treads accounts for the slow and halting (in the eyes of international financial institutions) process of economic

liberalization, and the relatively limited use (in the government's eyes) of direct coercion and repression.

### ***In the Gulf***

There are currently around 13 million mostly Asian migrant workers, paid around \$300 billion yearly, in the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>2</sup> Their numbers are those comparable to the total of those slaves (10-15 million) seized and transported from Africa to the Americas in the Atlantic slave trade over three centuries.

"I thought this was the land of opportunity, but I was fooled" said Mr Kumaran, 28, from Kerala, India, standing in a work camp on the edge of the city in the emirate of Dubai,<sup>3</sup> where there are well over 1 million migrant workers and a national population of around 250,000. For Mr Kumaran, as for many other economic migrants worldwide, the streets of the host country turned out not to be paved with gold, the appearance of Dubai's glittering and 'cloud-capped' towers, and its fabulous rates of investment and profit notwithstanding. "Only Kuwait profited. I got nothing but sand", reported Muhammad, a 44 year-old Jordanian mechanic (Beaugé and Roussillon 1988: 112). "I came here, and now I'm stuck here" said another.<sup>4</sup> "I have to survive," said Hassan, a Pakistani delivery boy at a supermarket in Dubai, "so I have stayed on in the country without papers." He continued, "I know that it is wrong, but I also know that my visa application will get rejected if I go through the right channels. Living with the risk of getting thrown into prison is far more preferable to going back home and seeing the distraught faces of my parents and siblings who depend on me for survival," he

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Nahar*, 5 March 2008.

<sup>3</sup> NY Times, 26 March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "The Towering Dream of Dubai" By Anthony Shadid Washington Post Foreign Service Sunday, April 30, 2006; A01.

explained.<sup>5</sup> The dull forces of economic compulsion and necessity, armoured by a cultural web of obligation, hope, moral economy, honour, and shame, and often compounded by illegal status and the absence of rights rivet workers into subordinated and menial positions in the host country.

The profound disappointment of migrants after some experience in the receiving country is extremely common in the history of labour migration. Strikes and protests, especially by insecure, first generation migrants, however, are not. Certainly significant protest of the kind witnessed in the Gulf countries since 2005 is unprecedented in these countries of major labour importation since the 1970s. While middle class migrant worker groups have mobilized on the issue of workers' rights, in a context where Gulf countries seeking investment care about their image in public relations terms,<sup>6</sup> and while sending-country governments have applied some limited pressure to improve the conditions of their workers in receiving countries, the mostly illegal strikes, demonstrations, and protests of workers seem to have been organized by workers themselves, and have a distinctly grassroots flavour. While sending-country governments and rights NGOs tend to denounce law-breaking and the destruction of property, such acts by workers have added significant urgency and impetus to the consultation processes and lobbying for reform in which wealthier and more 'respectable' elements are involved, and the perceived need to 'do something' about the situation.

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<sup>5</sup> "Welcome Mat Shrinking for Asian Workers", by Meena Janardhan 2003  
<http://ipsnews.net/migration/stories/welcome.html> site visited 17 April 2008.

<sup>6</sup> This pressure felt in Qatar, for example, with the initiative to build a workers' city providing better housing and facilities. Gulf News, 3 March 2008.

After the Bangladeshi protests in Kuwait in April 2005, there were strikes in Qatar and Oman in late 2005 and early 2006.<sup>7</sup> In the UAE, in September 2005, 800 workers staged a protest march down a main highway in Dubai, an action followed by eight major strikes over the coming months, especially the computer and equipment-breaking involving 2,500 workers at the Burj Dubai site in March 2006.<sup>8</sup> The following day, "thousands of labourers working at Dubai International Airport laid down their tools".<sup>9</sup> On 18 May 2006, 400 migrant Asians working for construction company Al-Hoda gathered on a construction site in the industrial area of Jebel Ali 40km north of Dubai's centre, demanding pay overdue for more than a month. Labor Ministry representatives were called to the scene and dispute was resolved.<sup>10</sup> In late 2007, construction workers demanding better pay and conditions took to the streets in Dubai, attacking police and overturning vehicles.<sup>11</sup> In Bahrain an unprecedented round of protest in February 2008 – including a week long strike of 1,300 workers on Bahrain's largest work site – accompanied the failed attempt by the Indian government – in a context of falling real wages – to secure a minimum wage for nationals (an attempt which had been successful in October 2007 regarding domestic maids).<sup>12</sup>

In light of how rare such strikes are among migrant workers more generally, it would be reckless indeed to presuppose any automatic line of causation, between migrant disappointment and economic misery in the host country, and instances of contentious politics and collective protest, even when expectations are so high and realities so harsh. Indeed, economic privation and necessity often drives migrants into

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Jazeera online, 23 March 2006.

<sup>8</sup> NY Times, 26 March 2006; AFP 18 May 2006; Shadid, Wash Post FS 12 April 2006; The Observer, 9 April 2006;

<sup>9</sup> The Observer, 9 April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> New labour law and minimum wage being drafted. AFP 18 May 2006.

<sup>11</sup> BBC Roger Hardy, 28/2/08.

<sup>12</sup> BBC Roger Hardy, 28/2/08; Gulf News, 2 March 2008.

undocumented and illegal categories from which position any kind of claim-making is fraught with risk of imprisonment or deportation. Far from operating to constitute a collective historical subject, in the Gramscian sense, migration fragments and alienates – it creates subalterns (again in the Gramscian sense). Beaugé and Roussillon write, for example, of Arab migrants to the Gulf that “the experience of emigration is expressed by a radical disorganization of all previous schemas of identification” (Beaugé and Roussillon 1988: 107-7). Chances for forms of oppositional hegemonic articulation with host country leaderships are greatly undermined, furthermore, by the hostility and racism directed at migrants. Press campaigns designate migrants as a ‘nuisance’ or a ‘contamination’. It is said that Pakistanis have no personality, Koreans eat dogs, Indians are mules (Beaugé and Roussillon 1988: 171-2). Asian immigrants are seen by some as the “new colonialists”, their presence raising all sorts of fears over internal security and social stability, not least by those seeking to foster pan-Arab solidarity (Seccombe 1984: viii; Fergany 1983: 13). Kuwaitis have a pervasive suspicion of migrants, and a “constant feeling of being under siege”. “We are few, they are many; we cannot afford to be trusting”, said a Kuwaiti woman (Longva 1997: 103). Beset by such hostility, heavy socioeconomic disciplines, forms of fragmentation, compulsion, and lacking collective representation, citizenship rights, segregated, and subject to deportation at the first sign of dissent, what would induce or permit workers to strike and protest?

One hypothesis is that protest might result when the possibilities of providing for families and discharging obligations, such possibilities being the key hegemonic form within the system, become increasingly distant – a development which would strike at the root of the hegemonic engine-room of circular labour migration. While I have not done the necessary research in the Gulf to verify or falsify this theory, there are

a number of initial indications which make it a worthwhile avenue to explore. The first is the fact that protests since 2005 have taken place just when the real-wages of migrant workers are falling because of inflation in prices of food, petrol, and basic commodities, and because Riyals, Dinars and Dirhams are worth increasingly less because they are pegged to a falling US dollar. This wage crunch does not strike at the acquisitive, selfish *homo economicus*, but at the *raison d'être* of migrants searching for much-needed cash to discharge family obligations, uphold their honour, and avoid shame. Falling real-wages is not a purely economic matter, but upsets the culturally and politically constituted universe of expectations and obligations associated with labour migration. This type of explanation allows for the importance of the material, without falling into materialism. Gulf countries could, of course, re-value their currencies, but they choose not to, pointing to the ways in which exchange rates are also matters of politics and not simply 'the economy'. It is not just that "With the cost of living rising, many have abandoned dreams of returning with a fortune."<sup>13</sup> Migrants must often abandon such dreams. It is more likely that with the wage-crunch, the more basic expectations and obligations of labour migration are under threat. This assault on the consensual elements in the labour regime, account, above all, it is hypothesized here, for the upsurge of labour protest in the Gulf in recent years.

## **Conclusion**

Workers' energies and subjectivities had been articulated hegemonically to menial migrant labour in the Gulf, and corporatist labour in Egypt through combinations of coercion and consent. In the Gulf, elements of consent were chiefly in the realm of providing for families in sending countries. In Egypt, these elements of consent

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<sup>13</sup> NY Times, 26 March 2006.

involved the Nasserite hegemony, forged in the 1950s and 1960s, where productivity was offered in return for social protection and nationalism. In both regions, the pre-existing hegemony has come under assault, especially in the last few years. In Egypt, IMF-sponsored structural adjustment, and an accelerated programme of privatization, has struck at the heart of the pre-existing Nasserite hegemony and its protections. In the Gulf, above all inflation and falling dirhams and dinars pegged to a falling dollar, have struck at the heart of migrants' ability to provide for families and preserve their dignity. Overall, it is not the inevitable contradictions of capitalism and imperialism, read in objectivist mode, but assaults on a pre-existing hegemony, in all its historical complexity, and attempts to save that hegemony, that account above all for worker protest in these two different settings. Given the new context, the complexities of political struggle, the common role of unintended consequences, the way interests are transformed through alliances, and the role of contingency, it is likely that far from restoring the *status quo ante*, these protests, like others in the global South in recent times, will lead in new and unpredictable directions.

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